



シーキューブ
CubexCurseδxCurious

水瀬葉月

Illustration たそりがため

123
III

水瀬葉月

Illustration くわりがため

-シーキューブ-

CubexCursedxCurious

III



Scene01:謎の来訪者



フィア
〈ある目的〉のために
夜知家に居候中なおせ
んべ大好き少女。



人形原黒絵

長~い黒髪でもって
フィアを襲う少女。
一体何者!?



夜知春亮

フィアやこののはを預か
って、彼女たちの目的
の手助けをしいている
じじむさ少年。

村正このは

官能ボディを持つ眼鏡っ
娘。とにかく肉が好き!



アリス

黒絵を追って夜知家に
やってきた、礼儀正し
い侵略者。

「苦難なく救済ありとや。や
」のお誘いが必要な苦難となうんことを」

Scene02:ビブオリオ家族会

Scene03:祝福だらけの再生誕



桜参白穂

無事サヴェレンティとの平穏な日々を……送
れてる?

「美容室《壇ノ浦》
新装開店でーっす!」

サヴェレンティ

超ドジっ娘なメイドさん。
白穂のもとに身を寄せ
ている。

13
—シーキューブ—
Cube×Cursed×Curious

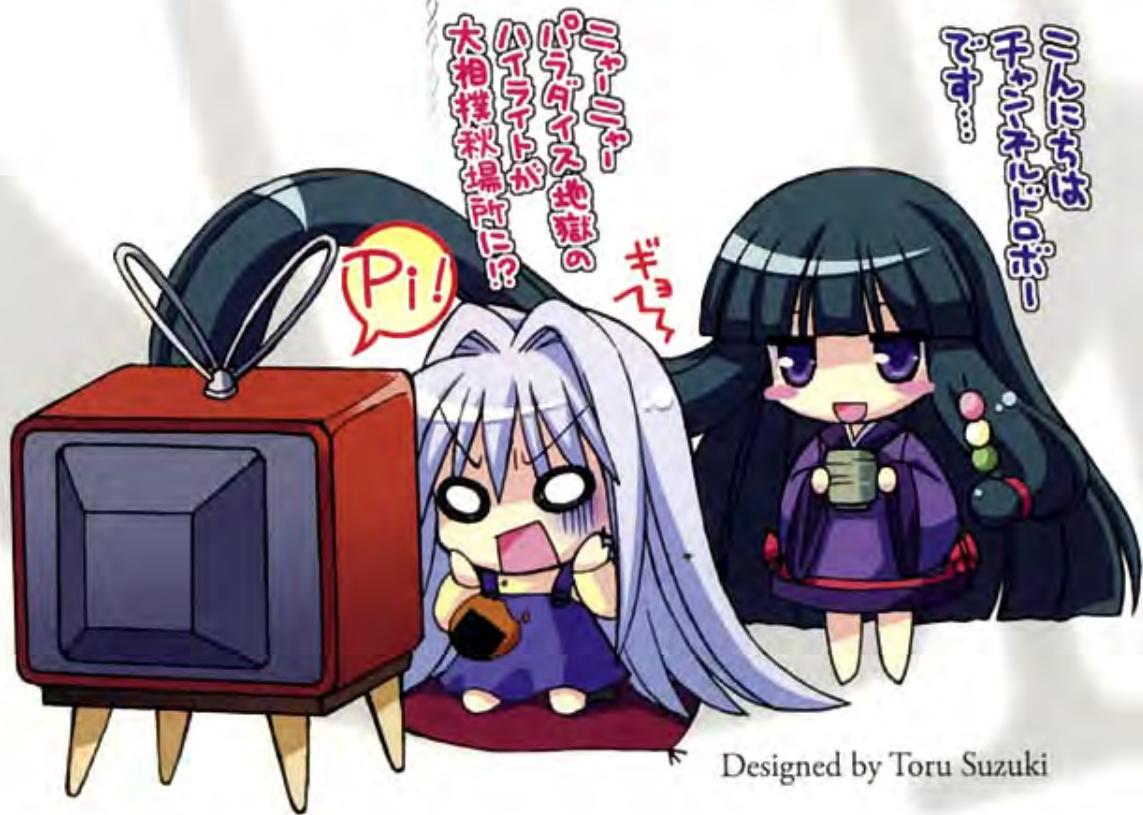
III

水瀬 葉月

Illustration さそりがため

Contents

- ◆ 10 プロローグ
- ◆ 22 第一章「帰還者は何処か不思議な」
"Welcome home, the troubled little girl"
- ◆ 74 第二章「来訪者は何処かに消える」
"Mama said, the culprit is me"
- ◆ 126 第三章「嗜虐者は何処にもいない」
"A gasper on the bed, or her cute secret"
- ◆ 194 第四章「超越者は何処にでもいる」
"Human"
- ◆ 286 エピローグ
- ◆ 301 卷末特別企画



Prologue

Part 1

Fear was feeling very frustrated, agitated from the bottom of her heart.

"Hmmmmm..."

Her elegant eyebrows, her large and striking eyes, and the corners of her little mouth were all twisted in frustration. Sitting cross-legged rather ungracefully in the living room, Fear was staring reluctantly at a piece of paper on the dining table before her.

Staring helplessly at the sheet of notes, Fear suddenly reached forward with her right hand and immediately raised her left hand with her arm against her head. Then keeping her arms outstretched like this, she began to spin them greatly. Spin spin spin spin.

After engaging in this mysterious behavior with utmost seriousness for several seconds—

Fear once again frowned and turned her gaze towards the notes on the table.

"Reach forward with the right hand and spin it while the left hand waves side to side above the head... Uumu, the description is so simple but yet my arms keep ending up doing the same motion...?"

Murmuring to herself, Fear finally groaned "uwah~" and laid down with her back against the tatami floor, apparently tired. Staring out towards the ceiling of the silent living room—

"Hmph... 'You seem quite athletic so something as trivial as dancing should be a piece of cake for you.' What complete rubbish? This is completely different from fighting!"

As Fear pouted, she recalled in her mind the stupid face of the shameless brat who was not currently present. Also, there was Cow Tits' undecipherable smile when she made irresponsible statements like "Don't worry, it'll be very simple~"

Those two were currently out shopping because they had discovered they were out of food as soon as they got home from school. Although Fear was reluctantly forced to stay home and watch the house because she lost at

rock-paper-scissors, it was just as well. After all, she had already reminded them repeatedly to restock on rice crackers, plus the fact that she had a task to work on—even though it was not proceeding very smoothly at the moment.

Once again she sighed—

"A sports festival huh... How would it feel..."

She imagined the school event that was going to take place several weeks later. She was very interested in the event itself, but the problem was—as was customary, each homeroom was divided into a "dance presentation team" and an "arch building team." During the official contests, the results of the dance creation and the arch building were supposed to be added to the total points... Dancing aside, why would building arches count for points at a "sports festival"? To this date, Fear still could not understand why.

"Ahhhhh~ If only I had joined the arch building team together with Haruaki, I wouldn't be having such a tough time now... Jeez, that Kana girl didn't even give me any time to think things over..."

"Simply by being in the team, Fear-chan's cuteness is enough to be an asset! I will absolutely never let go—!" Fear recalled the dance team leader who had forcefully recruited her. The only reason Fear agreed was because she backed down in the face of Kana's vigorous fervor, not because she particularly wanted to dance. That said—

Narrowing her eyes with displeasure, Fear suddenly rose up.

"Since Cow Tits said it is 'very simple,' there's no reason why I can't dance! Just you wait and see, I will instantly master a dance of this level!"

Glaring at the sheet of notes with diagrams to demonstrate the motions, Fear once again repeated the mysterious motion that resembled MP absorption. Just as before, her right and left arms kept moving in the same manner.

At this moment—she heard a scurrying sound from behind.

"...!"

This presence... Could it be... That thing? Roaming wild on its segmented legs, not content with making lairs on walls with its sticky threads but even

going as far as to hang the bodies of dead moths for long periods as emergency food supplies... That one—

The one whose name began with "spi" and ended with "der," the most hated enemy in the world!

Fear could not help but shudder. Her hand trembling, she grabbed the backscratcher lying on the side (like an old man, Haruaki had been using it just earlier) and turned around instantly. Just as she thought, on the tatami—

"G-Gwah—I knew it! G-Go and die—!"

Frantically, she smashed down using the object in her hand. Although she missed, the thing suddenly disappeared out of sight, perhaps frightened away, leaving nothing behind but the broken backscratcher that had snapped into two.

"Oh no! The weapon!"

The thing had also vanished without trace. Where? Where was it? Under the table? Behind the television? Or on top of the shelves? Oh no, could that thing be plotting to pounce upon me and therefore constructing those sticky lairs somewhere between me and the wall...?

"Fu... F-Fufufu..."

For some reason, she laughed. Very well, I will fight you to the bitter end! Indeed, this backscratcher was too small. I need a bigger, more powerful weapon to exterminate that thing completely from the face of the earth...!

Her hand trembling, she took out the Rubik's cube from her pocket. Then—

"Mechanism No.14 raking type, beast's claw form: «Cat's Paw»—Curse Calling!"

The cube emulation transformed into an object resembling an animal's paw. On the end of a long handle was a thick, sturdy component in the shape of a paw—one where five deadly hooked claws extended from the edges.

Holding the menacing torture tool, lowering herself halfway in a stance, Fear smiled with savagery and breathed heavily as she surveyed her surroundings.

"Okay, bring it on... I will smash you with this and have you drawn and quartered... Where? Where are you..."

It could not possibly have disappeared. Fear could still sense that scurrying presence. For a restless little insect, the sound was eerily loud. The loudness must be an illusion. Indeed, simply an illusion born from fear...!

Adjusting her breathing, Fear focused her attention on her hearing. Seconds—tens of seconds—minutes passed—

—Rustle!

"Over there!"

Turning around all of a sudden, Fear found some kind of black object moving in the corner of her view. An afterimage seemed to be rushing upwards along a column in the living room's corner. I've won! There is no place on the ceiling where you can escape to!

Holding the deadly backscratcher up high, Fear looked up vigorously.

Over there, just as she predicted, she found sticking tight to the ceiling in spite of gravity—

An expressionless young girl.

"...Oh, I've been found."

The girl murmured softly with a blank gaze. Immediately, she proceeded to scrutinize Fear as if sizing her up while she spoke:

"In any case, I'll capture you first... Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori»!"

Saying that, the hair supporting her body began to wriggle restlessly like spider legsGathering all her surprise, confusion and instinctive revulsion in one breath—

Fear screamed out loud.

"YAAAAAAAAAAH!"



Part 2

"The child must be moving in a most delightful manner right now... I'm starting to regret not installing a secret video camera before leaving the house. It could be used for blackmailing purposes in the future."

"But it's incredible... If she can move with such agility during combat, why can't she do it when dancing?"

"Moving her arms and legs independently in coordination with music is a first experience for her after all. The principles involved are different and require getting accustomed."

Haruaki and Konoha were on the way home, each with a shopping bag on one arm. Konoha was smiling with inexplicable happiness while she walked. Haruaki turned to face her and said:

"If that girl asks you for help, you must teach her more! As part of the arch team, I won't be able to help."

"Fufu, if she agrees to bow down and submit to me obediently, I might consider it."

Well that's truly difficult... Just as Haruaki smiled wryly as they reached the home entrance—

"...What... is that?"

"Woah! Looks very obviously suspicious!"

They were referring to a figure who had climbed the Yachi residence's enclosing walls to peek inside the house. Resting on the belly against the edge of the wall, upper torso leaning forward, the figure was postured like a towel hanging to dry on a laundry pole. Beneath the pleated skirt, two legs could be seen swaying with apparent amusement.

Exchanging a glance with Konoha, Haruaki approached.

"Oh my oh my, this scene should be titled 'Taboo Maiden Games'... But I'm reluctant to reject 'The Proper Way to Tie Up a Girl' too..."

A woman's voice, very clear and pleasant. Judging from the faintly audible mechanical sound, she seemed to be taking pictures.

"Umm... Excuse me."

"Oh my oh my, that spot even... Isn't this game crossing the line...? Ufufu."

"Hey, excuse me! The lady over there!"

"...Oh?"

Haruaki had to call her twice to finally get a response. The towel person slid down from the wall at once.

Exchanging gazes with Haruaki and Konoha, the woman smiled with extreme calm and composure.

"Oh my oh my."

"No, now is not the time to be going 'Oh my oh my,' okay... So what are you doing? This is my home."

Haruaki had never seen this woman with snow-white complexion. Her chestnut-brown hair was almost knee-length. Cordiality and beauty coexisted on her elegant facial features. Her striking characteristics included a monocle over her right eye as well as two or three watches worn on each arm. Judging from her long fluttering skirt and classy upper garments, at least she did not look like a thief.

"You are asking what I am doing... I suppose I should answer I am taking photos? There were quite a few good shots, thank you very much."

Storing the digital camera back into her shoulder bag, the woman bowed deeply.

"Oh... Uh... Taking photos... Are you a photographer?"

"Not really. It is for a certain purpose..."

The woman answered as she smiled benignly like the Virgin Mary. Konoha narrowed her eyes and said:

"Purpose? What purpose?"

"Well, summed up briefly, it is—"

Holding a finger against her cheek, she made a cute pondering gesture.

"Yes, summed up briefly—it is simply a stalker's behavior."

"...What?"

Haruaki and Konoha asked simultaneously. The woman laughed softly from her throat as if she found them amusing. She should be joking, right?"

"So, what is it actually—"

"For you two, it would probably be easier to understand if you asked that person over there. So please allow me to take my leave tonight—Well then, please take care, you two. We shall probably meet again very soon."

"The person over there? ...Hey, wait up!"

Maintaining the elegant smile on her face, the woman turned around and began to walk away.

The situation was increasingly baffling. Who on earth was this person? Just as Haruaki puzzled—

"Uwaaah... Ahhhhh... Ahhh? Gwahh... Stop... it... Ahhhhhhhh!"

"W-What is going on?"

Unmistakably, the sounds coming from behind the walls were the screams of Fear who had been entrusted with watching the house.

Ignoring the noise, the woman left. Haruaki's gaze followed her figure for a few seconds—

"Damn it! A whole bunch of incomprehensible things! Anyway, let's check on Fear!"

Dashing into the home with full speed, Haruaki hastily took off his shoes and rushed into the living with intense vigor as if his steps would break the floorboards of the corridor. The scene he found before him was—

"Ahhh... Ahaha... Stop... it!"

"No. This spot... How about that...?"

"Nnn... Ah... Ah... Afuu!? Ooh, hah... Guh!"

"Holding it in is bad for your health, you'll feel better if you let it all out... See, this spot is very sensitive too."

"Ah... That spot... That spot... That spot is... Ah..."

The shopping bag fell from Haruaki's hand. What on earth was going on? How did it come to this? Indeed, why—

"Ah... Ah, hee, aheefuhahahaha! Fuhyaha... Hey, I'll curse you!"

"Tickle tickle tickle."

—Why was Fear suddenly being tickled?

Suspended in midair, Fear was being restrained by the ankles with her legs spread apart slightly while her arms were held up behind her head. She was suffering attacks to the underarm, the flank, the navel area, the back, neck and thighs. Every time she was tickled, Fear made strange screams like "fuhyouhaha" as she squirmed her body, kicking her bent legs and struggling intensely.

More importantly, the apparatus used to suspend Fear in midair and tickle her was neither a rope nor a feather duster—everything was performed by the hair growing from a young girl's head.

Several bundles of hair were used to tie up Fear's body while other bundles groped all over Fear's body with exquisite control. From the perspective of common sense, this was undoubtedly an extraordinary phenomenon.

But for Haruaki and Konoha, this scene was all too familiar to them.

"You... What are you doing...?"

Haruaki's face twitched as he asked. Still keeping Fear restrained, the girl simply turned her head back and said:

"A suspicious person was caught and now under interrogation."

"Th-The suspicious person... That's you—!"

Fear screamed with flying saliva. I suppose this is the only time this girl could be considered a victim... Haruaki could not help but pity her. With a tired expression, Konoha sighed and spoke:

"Regrettably, this is no suspicious person but a new resident sharing our home. She only arrived recently."

"Exactly... So you ended up doing this the minute you got home? Shouldn't you be doing something else first?"

"Now that you mention it, right. Well then, even though it's a bit late—"

On close inspection, one could notice the tension in her expressionless face and blank gaze relax slightly—

The young girl raised her hand as a homecoming greeting:

"Haru, Kono-san, it's been a while. I have returned home."

Her voice carried neither weight, confidence nor emotion. An incredible sense of aloofness. Completely consistent with the way she behaved back when she lived here. Hence, Haruaki replied, smiling wryly:

"...Welcome back, Kuroe."

Chapter 1 - The Home-Returner Who Is Strange Somewhere / "Welcome home, the troubled little girl"

Part 1

In any case, it would be best to talk things out once everyone had calmed down—Deciding that, Haruaki prepared dinner.

"Okay... Before we start the meal, something needs to be done first."

Haruaki glanced at the dishes arranged on the dining table and spoke. Fear continued to hug her knees, glaring at Kuroe, whining "ooh~ooh~" with displeasure. On the other hand, Kuroe, whose physique was even more petite than Fear's, was sitting on a cushion, accepting Fear's gaze nonchalantly with a blank stare on her child-like face. Concealed in her long sleeves, her arms were crossed before her chest. This imperturbable presence of mind was inexplicably reminiscent of Chinese royalty... Except for the fact that she was using her hair to surreptitiously operate a hand-held gaming device under the table.

Hearing Haruaki speak, Kuroe sat up properly—In other words, she shut off the gaming device. Then she suddenly extended three fingers each from both hands and bowed her head towards Fear while speaking softly:

"My name is Ningyouhara Kuroe. This unworthy little little lady shall humbly place herself in your continued care."

"Why are you using a bride's marriage greeting?"

"And with one mention of 'little' too many."

Haruaki and Konoha ridiculed simultaneously. "Really?" Kuroe looked up and cocked her head doubtfully. With a face full of displeasure, Fear said:

"Kuroe huh... Hmph, I seem to recall hearing that name before somewhere. So you're the one who lives in the room adjacent to Cow Tits'? Hearing your name, I originally thought you had to be a picture or something like that."^[1]

"Exactly as my family name suggests, I am a Japanese doll. By the way, the reason why I chose the kanji 'e' as part of my name is because I wanted to give others an impression as pretty as a picture."

"Please don't shamelessly reveal this kind of thing yourself!"

Haruaki reflexively ridiculed a second time. As always, Kuroe's behavior was completely impossible to read.

"Seriously... Whatever, in any case, that's the kind of impression she gives others. One of those 'Japanese dolls whose hair lengthens' that you often hear about. Come on, Fear, could you introduce yourself at least?"

"Hmph. Fear—Fear Cubrick. There."

"Yes. And?"

"..." "

Kuroe turned her face towards Haruaki, expressionless.

"Say, Haru, am I being disliked?"

"How could you possibly think you weren't being disliked—!?"

Before Haruaki could answer, Fear's burning flames of wrath erupted.

"Think carefully about what you did to me! Not only did you suddenly entangle me like that, you even targeted this and that kind of spot with shameless tickling attacks...! B-Besides, you even let Haruaki witness... Witness me looking like that! I demand lots of apologies and compensation!"

"Truly sorry about that. But when I come home and the first thing I see is an unknown girl, breathing irregularly as she brandished a strange murder weapon while roaming the house, under such conditions—I had no choice but to capture her before doing anything else."

"A strange murder weapon?"

Haruaki threw Fear a glance, who turned her face away with a guilty conscience:

"Umm... It's a long story. That eight-legged demon with the name that starts with 'S'—Come on, that's completely unimportant! In any case, the current issue is, this girl humiliated me!"

"Hmm. Since you are this angry about it, let's do it this way."

Using both her hands and feet, Kuroe stood up from her cushion. Walking over to Fear's side, she then laid herself flat on the floor directly. Fear jumped in fright at her sudden behavior.

"W-What are you doing?"

"This is my offer of apology. As compensation, I allow you to do with my body as you wish."

"Wha..."

Thus Kuroe closed her eyes. Due to the directness of her attitude, Fear could not help but halt in puzzlement. After some time passed, Kuroe opened an eye while remaining lying on the floor—

"...Would you prefer if I took my clothes off?"

"Don't take them off! Damn it, what's with this girl...!"

"Fear, it's very tiring if you get caught up in her pace, you know~ The correct way to get along with Kuroe is to deal with her casually. After all, her actions are done on whim as well."

Haruaki's helpful words prompted Fear to return to the dining table, pouting.

"Ahhh~ Whatever! I'm hungry, Haruaki, time for dinner! Serve me the rice, okay!"

"Acquittal? Why thank you. I'm hungry too."

Returned to her seating cushion as if rewinding her motions, Kuroe held out her empty bowl as if imitating Fear. Haruaki and Konoha went to task filling the two girls' rice bowls respectively. As the rice cooker's steam condensed into a layer of mist on Konoha's glasses, she murmured with a tired expression:

"It seems like things have become lively all of a sudden..."

"Yeah... I guess this is the kind of feeling parents get once they have their second child huh~"

"Ch-Child. Parents. Right, for children to exist, there must be parents in the first place, so in other words... The two people apart from the children... Are like... Husband and wife? U-Ufu... Ufufufufu...!"

Konoha giggled to herself strangely, her blushing face looking up in the air. Without wiping the steam from her glasses, she kept moving the rice ladle in her hand, unaware that the rice bowl in her hand was becoming a Tower of Babel.

...Oh well. Haruaki had no idea why, but Konoha did act in this manner from time to time.

All sorts of trouble would increase with Kuroe's return. And most of them—essentially all of them would fall upon himself to clean up... Haruaki thought to himself in resignation.

"Haru's cooking is great as always."

"Thanks for the praise."

"The shameless brat has a redeeming quality at least. But apart from this, he's basically quite shameless."

"And just like always, Kono-san's cooking is instantly recognizable with a single glance. This cabbage roll is stuffed with so much meat it seems like it'd pop out as soon as I apply pressure with my chopsticks."

"A-As long as it's tasty, it's fine, right?"

"But it is quite tasty, yes."

"Kuroe, there's no need to talk to her that much. Because Cow Tits is Cow Tits, so all she can make is Cow Tits cuisine. Eating all that useless meat every day, she ends up growing heavier day after day, so heavy that one cannot bear the sight of her. Then realizing her weight has broken the bed boards, she secretly replaces them in the middle of the night. Now that's Cow Tits."

"Why do you have to lie like that?"

"..."(mournful eyes)

"Kuroe, don't you start believing her!"

In any case, it was quite a racket. Noise flew incessantly across the dining table... Despite the most terrible first encounter, Fear seemed to have grown accustomed to Kuroe more or less. Except—judging from the way she furtively threw side glances at Kuroe, she must have many questions? Indeed, Fear should have noticed it. Haruaki could not recall if he had mentioned it to her or not, but based on the fact that Kuroe traveled alone—one should naturally be able to deduce the conclusion.

After the meal, conversation at the dining table suddenly came to a halt. Indeed, Fear must have been waiting for this opportunity to speak up.

"Say, Kuroe, umm... You've been traveling alone all this time?"

"Yes, I like it this way, to wander unknown lands. What about it?"

"No, how should I put this... Won't you feel uncomfortable... So if you don't need to stay in this home, that means..."

Watching Fear stutter, Kuroe seemed to realize something. Gently, she closed her blank-looking eyes halfway.

"Oh... There's no problem. My curse is completely lifted."

"S-So it really turns out to be true! You're different from Cow Tits' 'almost lifted' state—Is that right!?"

In contrast to Fear who had jumped up from her seat, Kuroe sipped her tea as she answered quietly:

"Yes. Cutting the owner's hair bit by bit whenever night arrives, using hair as a medium to drain life force, or using that life force to lengthen my own hair—finally killing the owner by absorbing their life force completely, none of that will happen anymore. For convenience's sake, Haru remains my owner but even if some other human takes his place, I shouldn't feel the same impulses again."

"Is that so... Really... Curses can be lifted..."

"Didn't I tell you before already? You don't believe me?"

"I-It's not like that! Just that... Finally it feels more real..."

Fear answered awkwardly. Then she suddenly looked up as if she had thought of something.

"But... Your powers still remain, right?"

"Yes, it's very convenient."

As if to prove her point, Kuroe's hair wrapped itself around and picked up the teapot to refill her teacup. This was very rude behavior, Haruaki had already warned her many times... But he decided not to nag so much today.

"From what I've heard, your kind will retain your original forms, only with the curse gone away, that's all—I remember I mentioned this before. Say, Kuroe, I've already given up trying to stop you from going off to wander,

but at least keep in touch once in a while during your travels! I do worry sometimes!"

"Speaking of which, didn't this journey last a bit too long?"

Konoha asked with her head tilted. Really?—Kuroe tilted her head in turn as if none of this concerned her.

"Yeah. Especially after Fear arrived, many crazy incidents have happened. It would've been a lot easier if you were here to help. That's what I thought to myself quite a few times."

"Many incidents? What incidents?"

The expressionless girl answered directly with questions of her own. Haruaki threw a glance at Fear and scratched his cheek.

"Yeah, basically... Many incidents. They're over anyway, so there's no point to elaborate on them. Just be more careful from now on."

"Understood. By the way, I have a question—Haru, are you hurt?"

Kuroe looked at Haruaki's left hand as she spoke. She was particularly observant in strange areas of this sort.

"Yeah, roughly two weeks ago... But it's mostly healed."

Kuroe narrowed her eyes and murmured: "...'Many incidents,' so that's what you meant." She probably realized that these were real threats that created real injuries.

"...Then let's mend it a bit. Although it's just a small injury, having no injuries would be better. Give me your hand."

"It's actually nothing. But if you really must help me, then thank you."

Haruaki withdrew his left arm from his sleeve, exposing his entire shoulder. Konoha blushed and turned her face away, but kept sneaking glances over. What's going on? I don't think I have any strange chest hair, right...?

"H-Hey Haruaki, don't expose something so shameless! What are you doing?"

Fear was also blushing. But rather than explaining, it would be faster to simply let her watch.

Kuroe approached Haruaki, plucked several strands of her own hair and untied the bandages on Haruaki's left arm, using her hair to wrap up his arm instead. Then—

"Mode: «Satisfied Yorimori»!"

"Hmm..."

Haruaki felt something in his wound. A slight pain. But it only lasted for a instant and then it was replaced by an ambiguous feeling of warmth. The wound felt as though it were being covered by something like warm jelly.

"Woah... The hair gave off light for an instant just now!"

"This is the reverse flow of life force, thereby resulting in improved self-recovery... As a side note, results are better if you take this opportunity to warm up the wound. Just press something like a hand warmer^[2] onto it and it should heal up after ten-odd minutes."

"Is it because the excess heat will be converted into healing? I don't really get how it works."

"We don't have any hand warmers in this house, but even if we did, I'm not doing something so friggin' hot in this weather... Given its current state, I guess it'll heal up after a night's rest? Thanks anyway, Kuroe."

Haruaki had Konoha help him wrap the bandages again, over the the hair. Had he received this treatment immediately after the injury, it would have been quite a big help, but pointing this out now would not help anything.

"By the way, Kuroe, I was wondering just now, what's with the strange incantation?"

Fear's modest question prompted Kuroe to nod her head in rapid succession as if going "Great question." Although her expressionless face remained blank as usual, she seemed subtly delighted.

"It's very cool, right? Performing these moves quietly seems so uncool, so I thought up some names myself."

Fear's face seemed to be overcome with mixed emotions. Haruaki silently applauded her. Wow, that's really adult of you! How great you are, Fear! Because I gave my honest opinion once, I was subjected to merciless punishment by suspension upside down!

"Anyway, coming home means that your itch to wander has been satisfied for now? That said, Old Pops' vagabond ways are even worse than yours... Anyway, have a good rest now!"

Haruaki piled up the empty dishes as he spoke. Ah—Kuroe cried out softly.

"—I forgot to mention why I came back."

"Hmm? Why you came back?"

"Yes. Two reasons—which do you want to hear first? The interesting one or the boring one?"

Piling up plates and utensils just like Haruaki, Konoha asked:

"If we follow what happens in movies, we should theoretically listen to the interesting one first, right?"

"Indeed. Okay, Kuroe, I don't really get it, but please start with the more interesting reason!"

"—Ah, sorry, I refuse. I must force the choice to start with the boring reason."

"Then why did you ask us to choose just now? This makes no sense at all!"

"No, it's not like that."

Kuroe flapped her long sleeves.

"Because the relatively boring reason is: 'Someone seems to be after me.'"

"What?"

Moving her sleeve, Kuroe pointed at the garden. Only then did Haruaki realize that since a while ago, Kuroe's blank gaze had been directed towards the "something" she now pointed out with her sleeve—

"It's simpler to start with this reason, because the person is right here."

"Ara ara, I didn't expect to be discovered before I could say hello... How should such a scene be titled, I wonder? Ufufu."

A voice was heard from the darkness of the night. It was a familiar voice, no recollection necessary.

Part 2

The self-styled stalker woman from earlier was standing on the boundary wall. Long-haired, wearing a monocle, with watches on both arms. Unlike during the daytime, she was now dressed in a nun's habit whose color seemed to meld into the darkness. On her back, she was carrying a large musical instrument case almost the same height as her. Who knew if it were a contrabass or something, but in any case, it was clearly not an object for playing wonderful music.

By the time Haruaki and company got up and reached the veranda, the woman had already descended to the garden.

"Good evening, Kuroe-sama. I would like you to understand that this is an invitation as usual."

"That I know. But it was a different person last time, did you switch?"

"Yes, please call me Alice. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Just like earlier during the day, she made a deep bow.

"Hey Kuroe, what is going on? Who is this person? What does she mean by invitation?"

"To be honest, I have no idea. But during my travels, I kept getting harassed by similarly dressed people... I guess it's some sort of uniform? Hence, this is my first time meeting this particular person."

"Uniform? In other words, rather than individuals, they are part of an organization?"

Fear glared sharply at the woman in the garden. But as if completely oblivious to the pressure, the woman—Alice—continued to smile gently, as if bathed in holy light coming from behind.

"The Bivorio Family... That is what others call us. Within our circles, the mere mention of the 'Family' is enough for most people to understand."

"I think we've heard the name before? That person from the Knights' Dominion mentioned it last time."

Glaring severely just like Fear, Konoha recounted.

"Yes, that's the name. These people kept harassing me, trying to persuade me to go with them. I sent them away and escaped as appropriate, but

after a while, they would appear again... This kept repeating. Nothing is more annoying than this. Furthermore, they're polite to an eerie level."

"...Better than being impolite, right?"

Watching the face of the woman who was smiling politely in fact, Haruaki could not help but mutter. However, Kuroe continued speaking with her customarily blank gaze:

"Not necessarily. They were always polite—inviting me politely, stalking me politely, and even kidnapping me politely from time to time."

"Kidnapping...!"

"We actually have no wish of doing anything violent. But if dialogue fails to make any progress, it can't be helped. After all, using physical methods of invitation is a type of persuasion... To be honest, my current goal here is essentially that."

The woman admitted candidly while maintaining her smile. Then smiling at Haruaki's group who had entered a stance, she put down the musical instrument case she was carrying on her back.

"Wait a minute, I don't get any of this! What is your goal? And what is the Family?"

"Well, simply stated—"

Alice inclined her head adorably as she undid the clasps of the case.

"—The Family... Is similar to what you people do."

"What... Are you talking about?"

"Yes, my wish is simply to invite Kuroe-sama to my home, that's all. To have meals together, to have tea together, to chat together, nothing more. See, isn't that what you were doing just now?"

Alice was clearly full of crap. Going "Very well—" she stretched her body.

Haruaki gulped. What was she going to take out of her massive case? A sword? An axe? A spear? Since she was planning to abduct Kuroe, it could not possibly be anything harmless.

Under everyone's gaze, what Alice took out from the contrabass case was—

A contrabass.

"...What?"

"Dummy, don't be off your guard, Haruaki! Despite its appearances, who knows what abilities that thing might have!?"

"Indeed, appearances are irrelevant, it simply takes this form on occasion—Very well, salvation never comes without hardship, right? Let's hope that this invitation will turn out to be necessary hardship."

Uttering incomprehensible words, Alice grabbed the neck of the musical instrument and stepped forward, dragging the gourd-shaped instrument with her. At this moment—

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator», Curse Calling!"

A flash of silver leaped out. It was Fear jumping off the veranda to face off against Alice, already holding in her hand the drill transformed from the Rubik's cube.

"Hmph. Although I have no idea what's going on, Kuroe is my friend who shares the same dining table. I can't stand back silently and watch her get taken away... It can't be helped, I'm entering the fray!"

"Ara. Ara ara?"

An expression of surprise surfaced on the woman's brightly smiling face for the first time. Then she began to murmur to herself:

"Ara, speaking of which, I did receive reports on this... How truly surprising, this is too fortunate. Then how should I proceed now... Mmmhmm..."

"What are you mumbling about? Do you want to fight or not? Get on with it! I'm already prepared!"

Idiot, you don't really need to instigate a fight like that, right? —Thinking that to himself, Haruaki nonchalantly leaned over towards Konoha's side. Judging from the situation, he might very well have to wield the Japanese sword again.

However—Alice's next sentence completely exceeded the expectations of everyone present. Lightly nodding "Yes♪" to herself, she said:

"I understand now, so I shall give up on inviting Kuroe-san."

"What?"

"That's too quick for a change of mind!"

"I already said a long time ago, I'd be grateful if you people would just give up. Has the message finally gotten through?"

"Don't believe her. She probably means just this once, right?"

Faced with the various opinions of Haruaki's group, Alice shook her head elegantly.

"No, I truly intend to stop inviting Kuroe-san. Whether by force or by dialogue."

"R-Really?"

"Yes. But conversely... Please allow me to say this. Fear-in-Cube-sama, may we invite you to our Family?"

Fear's shoulders shook greatly while Haruaki gasped.

Thinking back, the person from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion they encountered previously had said—"Fear's awakening is a matter that concerns all organizations involved with cursed tools." Then it was not strange for this Family person to know about Fear. However—

"Why would you suddenly switch targets to her only now...?"

"Because we only received rumors that she 'seemed to have been found by someone and sent somewhere.' Until I saw her with my own eyes, I never realized she is the famous one—it's quite embarrassing to admit, but the Family is rather lacking in intelligence gathering ability."

As if expressing "How troubling," Alice sighed while resting her face against her hand. The total lack of tension in her attitude caused Fear to feel agitated instead. Frowning, Fear took a step forward.

"Hmph, you're switching to me now because Kuroe won't go? What a shameless attitude... But very regrettably, I have no interest in chatting over tea with a stalker like you, so go find someone else!"

"Don't say it like that. Could you please come with me?"

The only response she got was the faint metallic noises from the drill that was raised up high.

Sighing lightly, Konoha also walked down from the veranda and readied her hand in a karate chop. Indeed, even someone else other than Fear could not stand to watch without interfering.

"...So this is the situation. I have no idea what your true goals are, but these girls don't have the leisure to listen obediently to your proposals. It's best if you give up sooner and leave."

As Haruaki finished, Alice laughed softly as she remained smiling at the group. Lowering her head slightly, she narrowed her eyes and gently stroked the monocle on her right eye using her finger.

"True... The current situation seems highly unfavorable to me. After all, I've introduced myself so let me return for today."

Putting the contrabass in her hand back into its case, she huffed and returned the heavy-looking case to her back. Then she took another deep bow.

"Seeing as my opponent is the greatly renowned Fear-in-Cube-sama, simple suffering would seem to be somewhat insufficient. I will come up with more ways to invite you—but before that, please allow me to take my leave for now."

Before Haruaki and company could say anything, Alice had already taken off, her long hair and nun's habit swaying as she ran. Ignoring the unwieldy instrument case on her back, she sprinted and leaped over the wall with only assistance from her hand. After turning a final glance back, indeed she still kept her saint-like smile—she disappeared behind the wall.

"Listen to me carefully, don't come back ever again! Hey, are you listening!?"

Hearing Fear roar angrily at the other side of the wall, Haruaki sighed.

The whole incident was completely incomprehensible from the very start. Since the lady's goal was to take Fear and Kuroe away by force, she should be categorized as an "enemy," right... But her complete lack of hostility and ever smiling demeanor did not feel like an enemy's at all. What an inexplicably exhausting opponent.

"Seriously, what the heck is this...?"

Hearing Haruaki grumble, Kuroe bowed her head slightly.

"—Sorry, I've brought trouble to you all."

"Never mind, there wasn't any harm done in particular anyway, don't worry."

"Hmph, it looks like I'm actually quite well-known in these circles. Even if you hadn't led those people here, perhaps we'd still run into them sooner or later... Besides, judging from the way she fled, she most likely lacks confidence in fighting."

"True. I was able to use my meager powers to repel and escape from all the people who came to persuade me so far. Sending only a single person each time, perhaps their numbers are limited."

"Then there's probably no need to pay them special attention. If they come again, just drive them off again."

Kuroe eyed Fear and Konoha in turn, slightly closing those blank eyes of hers that were difficult to read as she spoke:

"...Thank you, Kono-san and Ficchi."

"Wait a minute, are you referring to me with that weird name? Why does it sound so stupid? I demand a revised version!"

"Gladly. What kind of impression would you like instead?"

"Mu? Well... I want something that sounds noble and elegant, conveying the impression of a proper and beautiful lady..."

"H-How could you possibly demand something like that!? Your brazen shamelessness is truly shocking!"

Haruaki smiled wryly as he was about to return to the living room—Along the way, he suddenly remembered.

"By the way, Kuroe, what's the other reason for coming home that you mentioned just now? The more interesting one."

"Ohoh."

Kuroe clapped her hands in a cliched manner.

"I returned simply because I ran out of money, that's all. So I plan on reopening the shop the day after tomorrow. I will be relying on everyone's help here—or rather, please help me!"

Expressionlessly, Kuroe glanced at Haruaki's twitching expression.

Maintaining her poker face, she inclined her head cutely and said:

"...Quite a bit of unexpected joy, right?"

Part 3

The warm water from the shower flowed down along and beneath the leather. This familiar sensation that had persisted over a good number of years already. Very likely, it was going to continue to the end of her life—This was Ueno Kirika's way of bathing herself.

She slipped her soap-covered hands between her skin and the leather. Detaching herself slightly from the leather like this was not enough to trigger the curse—

"To what extent could it be pulled off?" She had never confirmed the limits. After all, it would be a life-risking experiment.

As if performing machinery maintenance or some kind of meaningless ritual, her hands began to move.

Indeed, to be honest, taking a shower was completely meaningless. «Gimestorante's Love», which covered her body, was equipped with self-cleaning functions and was capable of maintaining the skin's cleanliness at a certain level. Nevertheless, she still bathed daily—psychological satisfaction without tangible benefit, or perhaps it was simply meaningless resistance against certain matters. Kirika was self-aware of this.

As Kirika left the bathroom after her shower, a faint smell of wet leather entered her nostrils. A sense of displeasure towards this had already become her daily habit. That said, the smell would dissipate swiftly as a result of the self-cleaning effect.

Putting on a shirt over the bondage suit, Kirika sat down on her chair and coldly looked down at the notebook computer on the desk. She had gone to the bathroom and showered for a change of mood, so the document file remained open on the screen. Its title—"Report Number 41."

Sighing, Kirika began to play a symphony of typing sounds. This too, was performed like a ritual, beneficial to no one, an extremely dangerous balancing act of mutual deception. No problems, no noteworthy

changes—Glancing over the file filled with notes of "nothing," she replied through email. Then she sighed again.

"Sigh... Absolutely ridiculous, how absolutely ridiculous..."

Her long hair hanging half-wet and scattered, she powerlessly dragged herself to bed like a corpse, lying down and staring blankly at the ceiling.

"It always feels... So exhausting..."

Her shoulders felt so heavy. Perhaps part of it was due to psychological factors—Kirika wondered in introspection. Her days had become quite hectic recently. Since class representatives were required to take part in the executive committees of the school's sports and cultural festivals, she had to take care of a mountain of work every day in preparation for the upcoming sports festival taking place several weeks later. After finishing that pile of work and crawling home exhausted, she had other unpleasant "work" waiting for her like today.

She could feel her body enveloped by fatigue and the lingering heat from the shower. The sensations of the familiar bed brought her a sense of sleepiness. Precipitating amidst this mixture of vague consciousness, questions escaped her lips in her haziness:

"Why... do I... have to do this? ...For what... reason..."

The serious class representative. A member of the Lab Chief's Nation. Her personal wish was for the latter title to be discarded like rubbish. But fact was fact, personal wishes were meaningless. Consequently, she possessed both identities but was neither at the same time. She simply went with the flow, playing the required role on demand, acting without purpose. What she wanted to do, what she hoped to become in the future, none of these prospects were certain—

She raised her arm to display white skin and black leather. Machinery maintenance. Indeed, she considered herself akin to machinery, simply a turning gear. Never moving forward, merely a part of the machinery, spinning in one place. A tool that does not move on its own, immortal machinery...

A youth's face surfaced in her mind at this time. The face of the excessively nice guy, the fellow classmate who did not mind whether she was a tool or a human, always smiling stupidly at her.

Phew... Kirika had barely relaxed her cheeks—as if waiting intentionally for this particular moment, the cellphone on her desk began to ring. Could it be... She hastily got up and grabbed the phone. How could this be? It would feel rather miraculous for him to call the instant she thought of him, but this sort of thing was—

Impossible, obviously.

"Hi, my beloved princess, how are you doing?"

Kirika hung up immediately without answering. This absolutely worst timing was annoying her. Soon after, the phone rang again.

"Hanging up so suddenly is really terrible, isn't it, Kirika? Zero marks for manners."

"...What business do you have, Himura?"

"Isn't it obvious? Of course I want to hear the voice of my beloved woman—"

"I am going to hang up."

"Oh no, I'm just kidding. I have received certain communications... Wait, you're going to hang up if I keep beating around the bush, aren't you? Let me stop with the jokes. This is neither a notice, a report, a discussion nor a request, but simply this—An order. Listen carefully."

"You're saying it's an order?"

In terms of position, Himura and Kirika were equal partners. Naturally, this superficial equality stemmed from her identity as the lab chief's younger sister. In actual fact, Himura's seniority as a researcher was undeniably beyond hers—Nevertheless, their relationship did not allow for either party to issue orders to each other on their own. For Himura to say this expressly, it implied special significance.

"The content is simple. Listen well, absolutely do not get involved with the Bivorio Family."



"The Family...?"

Kirika frowned and murmured. She had heard of the name before... In other words, her knowledge of them was limited to their name only. This was the consequence of her attempt to live her life as far removed from that world as much as possible.

"Why?"

"The reason does not concern you."

"I have never come across that organization. Asking me not to get involved with them implies... An incident where I could encounter them is about to happen, right? Rather, in other words, the Family intends to do something to those people—"

"You may speculate as you wish. But let me repeat myself, do not get involved with them."

Gulping, Kirika reexamined her own rules for herself. What was her first priority? The answer came immediately. Hence, her answer for Himura was already determined.

"...I am not obliged to listen to you, right?"

"I knew you were going to say this. But just this once, the princess is not allowed to be willful. Although it's a bit of a waste, I will use a precious trump card in my hand."

Cackling laughter could be heard from the receiver, as if someone were breathing hot air against her ear. Kirika felt instinctively disgusted. Although she really felt like throwing the phone against the wall, she restrained herself.

"...What trump card?"

"Blackmail material. To be honest, I really don't want to do this, but you leave me no choice! Simply stated—Princess, if you don't want your prince to know about that, then act obediently!"

Kirika was struck by sudden dizziness. That... That... He discovered it? It was not entirely impossible, but how did he...

"Naturally, it won't happen as long as you listen to my orders. Your secret... That ugly, disgusting, terrifying secret will be safe from the simple youth—"

"...Shut up!"

Feeling cold sweat break out from all over body, Kirika roared angrily. She really wished she could kill this man.

"So this is the situation. Provided you continue to lead your life as normal, nothing will happen and the secret will remain a secret forever. Well then, please do your best preparing for the sports festival. As a teacher, I will cheer for you, Ueno-kun."

As soon as the call ended, Kirika finally had a chance to put her feelings into action—naturally, it was the chance to throw the cellphone at the wall with all her might.

"Hoo... Hoo..."

Completely incensed, she glared viciously at the resilient cellphone which was rolling on the floor unharmed. The meaning of her pounding heart beat gradually shifted. From the distinct fear of her secret being exposed to—

"...What utter nonsense...!"

Clenching her fists tight, Kirika felt something other than fear swirling in her heart. Rage, shame and regret. Damn it! Only that particular matter cannot be revealed to that person, absolutely! She was helpless. But... Damn it...!

Amidst a vortex of emotions, a droplet of rebellious intent surfaced in her heart. This was a rebellion directed towards her useless self who had no choice but to yield to threats.

If only... Indeed, speaking of what she could accomplish by herself, there was—

Bleeding from clenching her fingernails too tightly in her fists, just as the contemptible curse healed her wounds—

Kirika's heart was consumed by nothing but single-minded determination.

Part 4

The next morning—Before the gates of Taishyuu Private High School, a silver-haired girl approached a male student.

"Hey, you."

"Eh?"

Fear glared severely as she looked up to the student, her lips twisted in a malevolent manner.

"Do you want to have a cut...?"

"W-What?"

"We will provide the necessary sharp instruments, so don't you worry. So, would you like one...?"

Intimidated by her strange forcefulness, the student could not help but step back. However, Fear continued to pressure him with her gaze sweeping over his body as if licking him.

"You really look like you want to be cut. Cleanly and decisively, snip snip... It will feel liberating, I guarantee it will be quite~ pleasurable..."

"E-Eeeeek~~~!"

"You don't have to scream. It's not scary at all, so there's nothing to be afraid of! And you definitely won't bleed... Hey, how about it? That heavy and obstructing thing on your neck, let us help you sever it cleanly into two, eliminating it at the root—"

"H-Hey—!"

At this moment, Haruaki extended his knuckles from behind Fear and clamped her head, grinding her temples from the side.

"Muhaff! Idiot, what are you doing? I'll curse you!"

"Wah—— S-Save me——"

Taking advantage of the opening, the student—with his shoulder-length hair—dashed into the school building like a fleeing rabbit.

"Oh no! My prey! Stop getting in my way, Haruaki!"

"Could you stop saying such misleading things!?"

"What! How was it misleading exactly!? I was simply persuading him, asking if he wanted to get a hair cut at the beauty parlor—"

"The problem is you don't sound anything like that! Your dialogue just now belongs undoubtedly to a tribal headhunter!"

Nothing of that sort—Fear pouted. In any case, Haruaki divided his pile of promotional flyers and gave half to her, instructing her to simply pass them out with a smile. Grumbling to herself, Fear began to distribute flyers to the students.

Meanwhile, Haruaki could hear Konoha's voice from behind.

"Please, everyone, the beauty parlor in the shopping street, the 'Dan-no-ura,' will be reopening tomorrow. You can obtain a discount with this flyer~ Come, thank you very much~!"

Smiling radiantly, Konoha was passing out flyers all around. As befitted someone who occasionally worked part-time at a bookstore in the shopping street, she was quite used to the task.

...Haruaki had gone to the convenience store early in the morning to photocopy the flyers and arrived at school earlier than usual to pass them out. Naturally, this all stemmed from Kuroe's nonchalant orders:
"Tomorrow will be preparations. Then the shop opens the day after. So all of you, please help promote the event at school tomorrow!"

Originally, Haruaki was thinking there was no obligation to help her out so much, to the extent of distributing flyers. Or to put it bluntly, he felt it was a hassle... But then he suddenly realized something.

Rising food and living expenses since Fear's arrival + Kuroe's return home + No increase in Old Pops' allowance payments = Life in abject poverty.
This equation was going to dictate their future.

Hence, Haruaki decided that Kuroe should at least cover her own cost of living given her independence. Since she mentioned that she had depleted her savings during her travels, this implied that any deficits incurred by Kuroe's shop from now on would directly impact the Yachi household budget...!

Consequently, as much as Haruaki and company lamented the world's unfairness, they still worked diligently to advertise Kuroe's business through guerrilla tactics.

"Hey Fear, how are things on your end?"

"I can't understand this. Why is the acceptance rate higher when I simply pass out the flyers silently...?"

Fear grumbled with a face of displeasure. Naturally, the answer lay in the balance of appearance and words... But Haruaki decided to withhold this from her for now.

"But a beauty parlor huh... I never expected Kuroe to have her own business..."

"It's already been a couple years... Old Pops and the superintendent helped out apparently, but I don't know the details. Anyway, she calls herself a hairstyling expert and her skills seem quite excellent."

"She manages the business alone? Given her appearance, do any customers show up?"

"Brace yourself and don't be too surprised. For the sake of convenience, Kuroe claims to be twenty-years-old to the public. An extremely child-faced, slow-maturing but exceptionally skilled hairstylist... Before setting out on her journey, she was already quite highly commended!"

"Commended... In other words, she was helping people, right?"

Fear looked into the distance.

"Yes. Perhaps because of her special skills, she was able to lift her curse so quickly without trouble?"

"Special skills... Really?"

Watching Fear fall silent, Haruaki understood what she was thinking. Smiling wryly, he smacked the back of her head with a stack of flyers.

"Hmm? Hey, what are you doing?"

"...You only need to do things at your own pace. Look, there's still so many flyers remaining, hurry and finish distributing them! So long as you avoid saying strange things, you will be a significant contributor!"

"I don't quite get what you mean by 'saying strange things'... Mu, damn it, what's with that shameless expression on your face!? Hmph, I don't need your reminders to get it done!"

Fear instantly rushed into a crowd of students but suddenly raised her hand and said:

"Oh, Kirika!"

Walking through the school gates was Haruaki's class representative—Ueno Kirika. Her skirt was unfashionably long as usual while her upper uniform was ironed straight and proper. She looked up with an inexplicably blank expression:

"Hmm...? Oh, it's you, Fear-kun... And Yachi... And Konoha-kun over there? What are you all doing?"

"This. You came at the right time, take this!"

Kirika glanced at the flyer she received from Fear.

"Beauty parlor opening... I see."

"Yeah, business begins tomorrow apparently."

"...I'll check it out if I feel like it. Well then, I'm going first."

Folding the flyer neatly, Kirika made her way towards the school building. Watching her from behind, Haruaki and Fear both inclined their heads in puzzlement:

"Somehow it feels like Class Rep isn't very energetic?"

"Yeah. Maybe she's not getting enough sleep?"

Because she had become very busy lately... Just as the two worried, a commotion began in their surroundings.

"H-Haruaki-kun, Haruaki-kun! We're in big trouble!"

"Oh Konoha, what trouble...? Ugh!"

Konoha was running towards him, carrying the few flyers remaining in her hand. Behind her was—

"What is this I hear about people engaging in unauthorized soliciting? Show yourselves!"

It was the physical education teacher (female) whom no one dared to oppose, famous for her Spartan teaching style. Always equipped with a shovel on her shoulder, this served as a strange identifying characteristic in the same vein as the superintendent's gas mask.

"Oh no! Fear, Konoha, time to retreat!"

"Uwah, what is it, what is it? Stop dragging me!"

A complete no-brainer, but from the moment the trio included Fear who attracted crowds like a panda at a zoo, the perpetrators were already glaringly obvious. Despite escaping the scene successfully, they were called out as soon as they reached their classrooms—the trio ended up receiving a harsh lecturing.

"Jeez... It's not like we were doing anything bad in the first place!"

Several hours later at break time, Fear was pouting with her arms crossed before her chest, clearly indignant.

"No, getting lectured was to be expected. I originally thought we could get away with it for one day but I was too naive."

"How could you brush the matter aside by concluding 'too naive'!? We still have flyers left! If we don't do something about this, the beauty parlor's plan for booming business will suffer a setback!"

Fear was unexpectedly motivated. Very likely, this was not unrelated to Kuroe's proposal of "If many customers come, I'll share some of the profit as thanks for your help!"

"Hey Haruaki, are there any other solutions?"

"You're asking me for other solutions... Well, there's no point if customers only come once tomorrow simply because of the flyer discount. We must do more long term promotion."

Muttering, Haruaki looked up and suddenly rested his gaze on the notice board hanging next to the blackboard. "X Days Remaining Until the Sports Festival"—the students' handmade calendar.

"Sports festival huh... Wait a minute, in that case...?"

Suddenly inspired, Haruaki stood up and walked over to Kirika's seat in the back. Fear also followed with a surprised expression.

"Class Rep, excuse me..."

Like a serious class representative, Kirika's gaze was cast down at the textbook for the next lesson. However, her face looked blank and her eyes did not seem to be following the sentences on the page.

"Say, Class Rep."

She must really be tired huh... Thinking that to himself, Haruaki called out to her again. Finally, she responded this time:

"Hmm... Yachi? What is the matter?"

"I just remembered, wasn't it mentioned during the last class meeting? The sports festival pamphlet still has space for advertising, so if any shop or business wants to be sponsors, we should invite them..."

Attendees would be flipping through the pamphlet many times in order to check the programme and other things. By placing an ad there, there should be a great publicity effect.

"Indeed it was mentioned before. But it's over already, the deadline was last week."

Hmm... Haruaki frowned. Seeing him like that, perhaps Kirika took pity on him—

"However, I remember hearing at the executive committee that the pamphlet's layout needs to be revised due to leftover space. Perhaps there might be a chance for leniency. But this means I'll need to beg the seniors."

Then crossing her arms before her chest, she added with a pained expression:

"Besides, this is an advertising space meant for fundraising and formally requires ten thousand yen to buy. If you're trying to beg for leniency after the deadline, you'd need to pay the executive committee at the same time as the request—Do you have the money?"

"Umm, no..."

"I don't really get it, but me neither."

It went without saying, the latter speaker was Fear.

Paying by installments was probably not an option... Just as Haruaki thought to himself, Kirika suddenly widened one eye and said:

"...By the way, I happen to have enough in my purse to scrape out ten thousand yen."

"No, having you help beg on my behalf makes me guilty enough already, how could I go as far as to borrow the money from you as well... That's totally unacceptable. All I can do is rely on you without doing anything..."

Haruaki suddenly thought of an idea:

"Oh, how about this, let me do something in return? Otherwise, I can't live with myself... For example, I could help you with your work until the sports festival..."

His proposal prompted Kirika to raise an eyebrow. Looking up at the classroom ceiling, she said:

"Come to think of it, I remember we were allowed an executive committee assistant. I originally wanted to decline, saying it probably won't be necessary..."

"But Class Rep, you seem so busy lately, you must be very tired? After all, given my unreasonable request, if I could help you in return, I'd gladly do so."

"I... am not very tired..."

For some unknown reason, Kirika's words became unnaturally vague as she lowered her gaze to the table. Then as if to change the subject—

"So what is your plan? If you want to make the request, it should be done immediately. Otherwise, it will be too late once the pamphlet is done."

There was virtually no room to make a decision. On one hand, there was the beauty parlor's plans for booming business. On the other hand, Haruaki was beginning to get strange thoughts, wondering if Kirika might suddenly collapse in the middle of the current conversation.

"Hmm... Let's do it. I am relying on you. Deal?"

"Very well. I'll pay the sponsorship fee upfront first."

"Thanks. I will try to pay you back as soon as possible."

"Uh—could someone explain to me in simple terms what's going on?"

In response to Fear tilting her head in puzzlement—

"I am going to help Class Rep with her work. In return, Class Rep will help with the beauty parlor's advertising... I'll probably become quite busy after

school? Most likely, I won't be able to watch you carefully from now on, so don't you go around doing anything weird, okay?"

Haruaki was part of the arch building team while Fear belonged to the dance team. Their activities after school were already different but because the workshop site and the practice grounds were quite close, Haruaki was still able to check if she was doing anything strange. But since he was going to be working with Kirika for the executive committee, he would be hard pressed to keep a close eye on Fear from this point onwards.

Hearing Haruaki's comments, Fear looked at Haruaki and Kirika's faces in turn, then began to pout unhappily for some reason.

"E-Even if you're not present, I won't feel troubled at all! It's true! You go ahead and help Kirika as much as possible! Rather, I should say, d-don't you go around doing anything weird yourself, shameless brat! Hmph!"

Fear strode back to her seat. Her behavior was totally incomprehensible.

In any case, Haruaki was going to become much busier. Preparations for the sports festival, helping Kirika, the beauty parlor's plan for booming business, and the incident last night that suddenly occurred to him—The Bivorio Family. Their goal was apparently to take Fear away but from Fear and Konoha's perspectives, they posed little threat as enemies and did not seem like a concern. Nevertheless, the matter of "being targeted" still caused unease that could not be erased from his heart.

(Sigh... Ever since Kuroe returned home, things needed to be done have increased all at once. Say, I wonder if Kuroe is actually doing her own part seriously?)

The "Dan-no-ura" beauty parlor was Ningyouhara Kuroe's castle. Located in a corner of the shopping street, the shop space was comparable to that of a small convenience store. The store sign, written in beautifully flowing cursive calligraphy, was also quite striking.

Standing before the metal shutters in front of the shop, Kuroe was staring up at the sign with her usual blank gaze. There were so many things to do. Cleaning, replenishing consumables, checking the equipment and facilities... All sorts of random chores. And most of these random chores required monumental effort.

"Ohoh—K-Kuroe-chan! You're back?"

"Yes, Yaomichi-san. I'm back."

The owner of the neighboring fruit shop came to greet her, followed immediately by the neighboring fishmonger—

"What!? Kuroe-chan came back! R-Really! Welcome back!"

"I have returned, Uomasa-san... I intend to reopen for business tomorrow. I'll be in your care."

Hurray—the strongly built fishmonger cheered and exchanged glances with the fruit shopkeeper. They made a fist at the same time.

"Hey hey, Yaomichi, this is not the time to be doing business leisurely!"

"Well said! Our shopping street's idol, Kuroe-chan, is reopening her shop...! How could we not help out? Very well, follow me, let's get that guy from the flower shop to help!"

The two men were about to rush off... But Kuroe called them back.

"W-What is it?"

Kuroe slowly blinked her blank-looking eyes and expressionlessly inclined her head slightly.

"...Thank you."

"! You're very welcome!"

For some reason, the two men shook hands and disappeared into the other end of the shopping street.

...Hmm.

Watching them leave, Kuroe blinked. Next—it looked like there was no need to worry about preparing flowers or other chores. Thinking that at the same time, Kuroe lifted the metal shutters and walked into the shop.

Part 5

After school, the sports ground was full of hustle and bustle.

In each class, students were divided into a "dance creation team" and an "arch building team." Consequently, their activities after school were also divided according to their teams. As a side note, each year level had eight

classes which were paired up into red/white/blue/yellow teams. In the actual sports festival, each year level would present the results of their dancing and arch building according to their teams.

"Class Rep~ We're running out of plywood boards~ Roughly three more are needed."

"I see, I'll get them—Yachi, let's go."

Since they belonged to the arch team, Kirika and Haruaki worked on that side for the most part. Or rather, because the dance team had Kana's supervision, there was no need to interfere.

After completing formalities behind the school building where materials were piled into mountains, they brought the plywood boards (obviously carried by Haruaki) back to the corner of the sports ground.

In contrast to the arch team members who wielded hammers and saws while working in their tracksuits, there was a group of students nearby lightly dressed in gym clothes for the most part. It was the dance team. Slightly concerned, Haruaki took a glance—

"Mu... Oh. I-Is this right?"

"Your motion just now... Looks like there's progress... I guess?"

"...Hmm. From 'two arms moving together,' progressing to 'one arm not moving at all'...?"

Under the scrutiny of her classmates, Fear was still performing strange motions resembling Tai Chi. To go so far as calling it progress, the kindness of these classmates could probably be considered a virtue, perhaps? Haruaki thought to himself.

That girl is clearly quite athletic... Thinking the same thing as usual to himself, Haruaki carelessly asked without consideration:

"You're quite athletic too, Class Rep, why didn't you join the dance team?"

Walking in front, Kirika's shoulder shuddered but she maintained her pace and answered without looking back:

"...You really think I could join? In the official performance, I'll need to wear a dancing outfit."

"Oh right..."

Too careless. Kirika had reasons why she could not dress lightly even during summer. Cursing himself for his thoughtlessness, Haruaki ran up to walk with her side by side and said:

"I-I'm truly sorry, I forgot... In any case, I am really sorry!"

Kirika looked up and threw Haruaki a glance. "You forgot huh..." She seemed to relax the tension in her face slightly.

"This isn't important. Stop daydreaming and deliver these plywood boards to them quickly!"

"G-Got it!"

And as soon as he ran back to them—

"They seem short on manpower over there, go help them with hammering the nails... Hey, there's no point if you don't bring hammers! Go get me two more of them!"

"Why am I suddenly getting this Sparta feeling? And you seem subtly happy..."

"Nothing of that sort. Move it!"

Mixed into the small group of people building the arch, Kirika and Haruaki began to swing their hammers. In the corner of his eye, Haruaki caught Kana ordering the dance team to take a break: "Okay, everyone recharge your energy separately—!" Haruaki tried to convey with his gaze to Fear that "the two of us are being worked to death here, let's all do our best!" But for some reason, Fear stuck out her tongue and made a face as she watched Haruaki and Kirika crouching side by side. We're clearly suffering over here, I really don't get what she's thinking.

Konoha's class was next door to Haruaki's and assigned the same color team. She was also in the dance team. Dressed in gym clothes like Fear, although she did not stick out her tongue, Konoha was pouting subtly. Turning her face away, she left with her friends.

"...Should I be sorry for doing this to those two..."

"Hmm? Class Rep, did you say something?"

In response to Haruaki's question about what she was murmuring about, Kirika gave a subtle smile that seemed intermediate between courtesy and shyness. Was she talking to herself?

Then continuing to hammer for a while, Kirika spoke up softly, her face still facing forwards.

"I should have said this earlier... But thank you for helping me."

"This is mutual, right? Besides, Class Rep, you've been looking really tired lately... Moreover, you look over exhausted right now. You should order others around on occasion and relax, or else you'll collapse from exhaustion."

"Over exhausted... Really... Perhaps a little. In fact, I sometimes do wonder why I'm doing this."

How rare it was to hear Kirika grumbling. Haruaki looked in amazement at her prim and proper face.

Discovering his gaze, Kirika glanced sideways at Haruaki and sighed with a chuckle:

"But very unbelievably, I feel quite relaxed today. Yes—very happy indeed. So don't you worry. We should work hard to prepare a wonderful sports festival."

Despite her saying that, Haruaki still felt that Kirika's exhaustion was written on her face. But since he did not have an instant remedy for its effects, he could only chat meaninglessly as therapy.

"Of course you feel relaxed, it's because of my healing powers! You can look forward to healing mascots modeled on me as prizes for crane games in the near future!"

"...Absolutely ridiculous."

Her reply was the same as usual.

She seemed slightly happier than usual. But also—

Suffering slightly more than usual as well.

Sunlight was streaming vertically, falling straight into the ocean.

Inside a warehouse by the seashore, a woman was watching the outside scenery through a crack in a slightly open door. Her field of vision was framed rectangularly almost like a painting. A canvas depicting the ocean and the setting sun. This country's sun felt warmer than the one back home. But seen from this narrow field of view, the sight was virtually no different from her homeland.

"I title this... 'Home, Seen in Foreign Lands.'"

Alice smiled and murmured softly. Carrying luggage on her back, she tilted the cup in her hand slightly. The sweet aroma of milk and honey entered her nostrils. In days past, this would have been a luxurious treat for her... And even now, she still enjoyed it greatly. But if one were to call her childish, she would feel a little hurt on occasion.

Indeed, this was a kind of luxury in the past. She reminisced.

At her first homeland—the welfare agency whose name she had forgotten, this was not something she could have drunk. As for her second homeland—the current one was a nameless church. Sandwiched on both sides by tall cliffs, the church seemed as if it were located at a valley in hell. Rather, one should call it a private orphanage. This was where she first learned of this drink. The occasional cup of warm milk offered pleasure beyond any food.

Hence, whenever she drank this, "home" naturally surfaced in her mind.

Ah yes... Home sweet home. Her beloved decrepit church. It was in that home that she had obtained everything. The priest had adopted her from the welfare agency, taking her and a number of companions to that place. Only there did she obtain a name for the first time and stopped being just a number. Alice. She learned to work there and had many encounters. There were many unhappy memories, and naturally, wonderful ones as well. Between the cliffs, facing the ocean, she learned the beauty of the setting sun. Furthermore—She obtained family.

Gulp... The sweet, warm milk slid down her throat.

"...If only we could watch the scenery together, drinking sweet milk, it would be such a wonderful thing."

If only she could understand—Alice thought to herself. Really, that was all she wanted. Rather than inviting the girl simply through force then convincing her afterwards, Alice hoped she could understand first before coming here.

But having exhausted her words, Alice did not think the girl could understand. Hence—she began preparations. A little time and a little effort were necessary. With this, the girl would be able to understand.

Indeed, there was no need for impatience. Tonight shall be spent getting ready leisurely...

Pondering over these matters, Alice continued to savor her homeland's taste as she looked out to her homeland's scenery.

After returning home from school, several hours had passed.

Finished with dinner, Fear rushed headlong into the bathroom. Leaning her back against the bathtub, she looked upwards and sighed:

"Ooh... Damn it, today didn't go well either..."

She recalled the scene after school. Despite trying very hard, the situation remained the same. She alone was conspicuously behind the others by far—or rather, after assessing calmly, she realized she was the only one whose motions did not resemble dancing. Kana and the others had comforted her, saying "There's still a lot of time!" But at the same time, they also said: "When the time comes, we might have to let Fear-chan perform an original dance alone." That would be truly vexing if it really turned out like that.

Why could she not dance well? Was she still unaccustomed to human form? She had already spent significant time moving about in this form. In that case, was it really because she was not human originally and just a tool—

"That's not right. Cow Tits can also dance. This is purely just a difference in amount of practicing! I just need to try harder!"

Splash—She got up from the bathtub and made a cheering pose by herself.

"Speaking of cheering—Kuroe's shop will be opening tomorrow. I have no idea how I could help, but she'll need to do her best as well..."

The sliding door opened.

"You just need to help welcome the customers, that's all."

"Muah! W-What? I'm taking a bath right now!"

The subject of discussion suddenly slid open the glass door to enter the bathroom. Naturally, she was completely nude with only her long, flowing hair to cover her body. Faced with Fear's reprimand, Kuroe simply answered with her usual poker face:

"I have spent all of today preparing, so tired... I want to take a bath earlier. Besides, baring ourselves completely is the best way to strengthen relations with someone you just met. Indeed, this is perfect timing."

Splash!

"This is so cramped!"

"It feels more cramped if you struggle randomly."

She was right. Fear had no choice but to shrink herself into a ball as much as possible, submerging her shoulders in the warm water again. But after jumping in, Kuroe kept her legs extended straight as she leaned against the side of the bathtub. Although Fear did not get kicked, she could feel Kuroe's bare skin making contact with her thighs and shins from time to time.

"My legs are sore, so excuse me while I stick them out..."

"I'm very tired too!"

"Ah~ I knew a good soak would do wonders, now I feel like sleeping..."

"Are you listening to me?"

"Snore..."

"You're really sleeping!"

Kuroe's snoring persisted. She really seemed exhausted. Feeling it would be a shame to wake her up, Fear could do nothing but pout and watch her sleeping face.

This continued for a while when suddenly a question surfaced in Fear's mind—Or rather, she was struck with an inquisitive sense of curiosity.

This girl's curse was lifted. For tools like them, this would be the most dramatic change. It would not be surprising for there to be special changes in appearance or form... Although Haruaki had said "there was no difference except with the curse lifted," he could not have examined Kuroe's body to confirm it, right? Despite finding no difference in Kuroe's appearance at a glance, Fear wondered if Kuroe's lifting of her curse would result in a decisive difference somewhere on her body?

"Fumu... Looks like it's worth checking out..."

Making waves in the tub's hot water, Fear crouched down partially, bringing her face quietly towards the snoring Kuroe, scrutinizing her entire body obsessively. She really seemed no different... Cheeks as smooth as a newly shelled hard-boiled egg, shoulders with water drops sliding down, a bust whose size gave Fear a sense of camaraderie, a belly heaving up and down lightly in the hot water. The skin covering her entire body was smooth and white as snow.

Nothing unusual in appearance.

Next, Fear decided to try her sense of touch.

First she poked Kuroe's cheeks. Very elastic.

"Mmm..."

Kuroe exhaled. She was still asleep. Then Fear patted her shoulders lightly. Perhaps because they were not very fleshy, Fear's palm felt a smooth sensation but with a subtle bony feeling. Then she reached into the water and turned her investigation to Kuroe's chest, belly and navel areas.

Sweeping her hand back and forth over those elastic and supple thighs underwater... Fear could not find anything unusual after all. Just as she was thinking if she should give up—No, wait. She realized only at this moment.

"Right, I guess I must check out this girl's 'most important part'..."

Just as she was about to extend her hand towards that place—Fear noticed a gaze.

"...?"

The girl, whose body was being toyed around, was inclining her head with surprise in her blank gaze. Fear pondered for a moment. After some

thought, she concluded she had done nothing wrong and so—she should ask Kuroe honestly.

"Let me touch you."

Several seconds passed.

With some splashing, Kuroe slowly shrank into the bath water until the water reached the edge of her mouth—

"...Hmm... Okay...?"

Shyly yet with a sense of anticipation, she looked up and gave her answer.

Haruaki's cellphone was missing. After searching his room for a while, he suddenly remembered he had forgotten it in the laundry basket.

In order to prevent an accidental incident, he knocked cautiously before entering the changing area. He already knew Fear was taking a bath, but the discovery of Kuroe's clothes in the basket left Haruaki's head tilting in puzzlement.

(They're bathing together...?)

After returning home with a completely exhausted expression, Kuroe had disappeared all of a sudden. Haruaki originally thought she must have returned to rest in her own room in the accessory dwelling...

Whatever, strengthening their relations was a good thing. Kuroe was always dead set on doing as she pleased, so Fear most likely could not refuse? Figuring out the situation, Haruaki retrieved his cellphone from his clothes in the laundry basket. "Done—" Just as he was about to exit the changing area—He overheard.

"Hmm... This feels nice..."

"Hey, don't move randomly! This is my first time doing this!"

"Don't worry, your technique is good... You can... Go a bit harder."

"Like this? Oof! Oof!"

"Yes, it feels great. Right, that's the feeling, keep going...?"

Haruaki held his breath. What the heck? What on earth are they doing?

His sense of reason was whispering in his ear, get out of this place as quickly as possible. However, his body refused to listen.

"Umuu... On my end, the feeling of playing with this... Feels quite nice too..."

"Oh that place? You need to use a more scratching motion..."

"Like this?"

"Yes, that's right. Ah yeah, this feels much better than doing it myself... Fufu, Ficchi's fingers are so gentle. It's wonderful."

"I-I wasn't being gentle on purpose... Hey, are we done yet? My fingers are getting tired."

"Hmm... Then let's finish it in one fell swoop, do it!"

Completely immobilized, Haruaki then heard—

Splash—

"...Splash?"

It sounded like someone pouring a basin of hot water over their head at once.

Struck by a sense of dissonance, Haruaki stood there in confusion as the glass door slid open immediately.

"Uumu... Your hair doesn't seem unusual after all, apart from its ability to move."

"Even if your curse is lifted, there won't be any change to your appearance. Thank you for washing my hair."

"Hmph, I only did it for confirmation, I had no choice... Hmm?"

The two girls' bodies were dripping with water. Standing in front was Kuroe, her undeveloped body delicately obscuring Fear. On the other hand, Kuroe made no effort to conceal herself and simply stood there blankly. Only her long hair barely covered the critical parts of her body, avoiding Haruaki's direct gaze.

After the passage of several seconds, a duration that could neither be described as long nor short—Fear instantly blushed to her ears and wrath consumed her eyes.

"W-What... What are you doing? Sh-sh-shameless brat! I'll curse you!"

"...You wanted to watch? Just give the word and I'll join you in the bath, Haru."

"O-Of course not! How should I explain this... It's not like that at all! I didn't do anything!"

"What is with the noise? What on earth are you shouting... about..."

Konoha entered at this moment, adding to the chaos. Why do I remember similar happening before... Haruaki thought to himself in despair.

In front of Konoha whose expression was frozen, Fear pointed at Haruaki with such vigor that seemed as if it would poke a hole in his forehead and said:

"Shouting? Just see with your own eyes, this shameless brat was peeking while we took a bath—"

Then Kuroe turned her blank gaze towards Haruaki's hand and added:

"Not only was he peeking but also using his cellphone camera, committing a criminal act driven by the impulses of puberty..."

"N-No! I didn't peek and as for the cellphone... I only came in to take it! That's why...!"

"To take photos. I knew it..."

"Why are you girls failing to understand even though I am clearly speaking in Japanese? This is too unbelievable! It's all a misunderstanding, I've done nothing against my conscience!"

"...""...""..."

Why am I only getting cold stares in response?

"...I didn't... Come on... Hmm, let's put this aside for now. Y-Yes, let's head over to the living room and discuss what we're doing tomorrow over some tea! At the very least, we need to assign roles for helping out at the beauty parlor tomorrow, right? Do you all agree!?"



Haruaki forced a smile and was about to leave the changing area when Konoha grabbed him by the arm.

Then solemnly, she declared:

"Before we discuss tomorrow—Let's hold a family meeting first."

...Family meetings don't need such a murderous aura, right?

Chapter 2 - The Visitor Who Disappears Somewhere / "Mama said, the culprit is me"

Part 1

Haruaki had some idea that people treated Kuroe as a mascot, but he never expected how far it went.

The next morning was Sunday. With partial trepidation, Haruaki and his group watched the scene unfolding in front of the beauty parlor, the "Dan-no-ura."

"The flower wreaths are here! The flower wreaths!"

"These lunchboxes are made from my shop's food! Please eat these at midday!"

"Kuroe-chan, you can never have too many towels, right? Take these!"

That was the basic situation. People from the shopping street appeared one after another, either to congratulate Kuroe or to offer gifts to her. In a certain sense, she really was the most outstanding person in the shopping street.

"Uumu, how amazing... She's really treated like a princess!"

"Your description is a bit exaggerated, but I guess that does capture the feeling."

At this time, a man rushed over from the electric goods store opposite. It was an excessively skinny, glasses-wearing, middle-aged man.

"I heard that Kuroe returned? Oh no, I'm late!"

"Hello, Nakajima-san, it's been a while."

"Ooh~ As the chairman of the central shopping street's Kuroe-chan fan club, this is such an embarrassment... A-Anyway, please accept some batteries from me! Here, sizes AA, C, D—eh, and even some lithium batteries for good measure!"

"...I don't need them, but thanks anyway. Won't you get scolded by your wife?"

"As long as she doesn't find out! Ah, that reminds me, I must reposition the camera in my store to face yours, Kuroe-chan!"

Thus, Nakajima-san inexplicably went and turned the anti-theft security camera in front of the electric goods store around to face Kuroe's beauty parlor instead of his own store. This way I'll be able to record Kuroe-chan's lovely face every day! Just as he thumped his chest and declared it, Mrs. Nakajima emerged from the store with a courteous smile and dragged her husband back.

"...What a weird bunch. Haruaki, do you know them?"

"Only as names with faces. Although I sometimes come to this street to shop, it always feels like I'm dealing with relatives, making me want to stay away respectfully... See, it's the same with Konoha."

Over on that side, a middle-aged lady in an apron—the bookstore's owner—was chatting with Konoha.

"Kono-chan, you haven't been coming lately. What's the matter?"

"Sorry, I've just been busy recently... I'll come trouble you again once I have more free time."

Konoha also seemed to know a lot of people here as a result of her part-time job. In response to Haruaki's explanation, Fear expressionlessly went "Oh~" as a cursory response.

In this manner, the gathering of crowds came to an end while the opening time approached. Haruaki and his group decided to enter the beauty parlor for a meeting.

Objectively speaking, the interior was definitely not very large. The place was furnished with a cash register, a sofa for customers to sit while waiting, and two chairs facing large mirrors. The back of the shop had a small storeroom and stairs; these stairs led up to a room that served as Kuroe's second living space. Having already lifted her curse, Kuroe did not need to confine herself to the Yachi residence and spent roughly half her time living here every month.

"Let me explain our plan. I will focus on serving customers inside the shop, so Haru and you girls should distribute flyers and bring in customers outside... Once the customers start to pile up, I'll rely on Haru to man the cash register and take care of customers. That's basically how it'll go."

"I don't mind."

"Hmm. So all I need to do is hand out flyers like yesterday?"

"For today, other than distributing flyers, please also pull interested customers directly into the shop."

"...Although she said pull directly, that doesn't mean you should use physical force to drag them."

"Know the distinction."

"W-What! I know that at least, okay!"

"The beginning is the most important. In fact, were I a bit more greedy, I'd like to arrange more manpower and equipment—right, such as cute mascot costumes or the like. But there wasn't enough time and it's too late by this point."

Just as their discussion reached this point, a series of honking noises could be heard. A strangely round moped had stopped before the shop and the driver was wearing a cute, pink helmet—the impeccable cool beauty and superintendent's secretary, Houjyou Zenon. Sitting in the moped's rear carrier was a displeased girl with extremely prim and proper facial features, aloofly challenging traffic safety laws with her lack of helmet.

"Zenon-san aside, why would Shiraho...?"

As soon as they recalled the point of commonality linking these two, they found a girl dressed as a maid, rushing madly while carrying a huge crate, arriving slightly later than the moped. There were simply too many things wrong with this scene that one would not know where to start.

"Okay, we're here... Ah, uwaaaah!"

The maid—Sovereignty—found herself losing control, unable to brake her momentum, almost dropping the box she carried onto the floor. Her skirt fluttered as she frantically waved her arms and legs, finally regaining her balance with much difficulty. Then the trio entered the beauty parlor together.

"What's up, Zenon-san?"

"The superintendent suddenly called me, asking me to work overtime on a weekend. But my task seems to be a simple delivery—Please accept this congratulatory gift from the superintendent."

Zenon handed over a large bouquet of flowers. How did the superintendent find out about today's event? Haruaki wondered in puzzlement, only to realize Kuroe must have contacted him to inform him she was reopening the shop. After all, this shop was established with the superintendent's help in the first place, so it was possible that she asked him for assistance again.

"I simply followed along. Seriously, that man is always doing irritating things."

"Good afternoon~ Uh—He asked me to bring this... Saying 'no celebration is complete without this.'"

Shiraho grumbled gruffly while Sovereignty handed the heavy crate over to Haruaki. It was filled with bottles of alcoholic drinks... The superintendent could not be unaware that virtually everyone present were minors, right? At this moment, Sovereignty noticed Kuroe for the first time:

"Uh... Hello, nice to meet you, I am Sovereignty, the superintendent's secretary's assistant-in-training. You are...?"

"Nice to meet you too, I am called Ningyouhara Kuroe...?"

For some reason, the self-introductions halted halfway through. Then the pair gazed solemnly into each other's face, nodding at times, imitating each other's movements, touching the other person's fingertips like movies of old, finally—

'...Let's become great friends!'

They embraced tightly. Perhaps because they were both dolls or they sensed something from each other?

Zenon ignored all this with a serious expression:

"There is one more thing for you. He said it was 'something for attracting customers.'"

"Oh thanks. Are there any mascot costumes? We were just talking about them. Let's see...?"

Accepting the bag from Zenon, Haruaki opened it for a look.

Inside was a high-slit Chinese dress.

"What the heck is that guy thinking..."

"Even though I don't really get it, I know this something that can be classified as shameless."

"Really... Wearing this would require substantial courage..."

As if she had been waiting patiently for this particular response from Konoha, Zenon took out another bag from somewhere.

"I almost forgot. Since the superintendent has offered his full support, it would be unbecoming for me to do nothing as the secretary. Hence, I have privately prepared some support supplies. This was originally a backup uniform for my subordinate, but I think it should come in handy on certain occasions. If you are completely uninterested, it is fine to ignore this."

They opened the bag for a look.

Inside was a maid uniform.

"Ah, this might be great! In fact, I found it quite adorable since a while ago..."

"...! Then please wear it, I'll help."

The instant Konoha murmured softly, Zenon's eyes flashed and she said: "Is there a place to change inside? Let's borrow it." Then she began to drag Konoha.

"Eh? Eh? Umm, I still haven't decided whether to wear it or not... Besides, I can wear it on my own!"

Zenon continued to drag Konoha along without stopping. Who knew if she failed to hear Konoha's protests or she simply did not wish to hear?

Ten minutes later—A flawless glasses-wearing maid appeared in the beauty parlor.

"Umm... Would this look quite weird?"

"N-No! Not weird at all! Umm—It suits you quite well, I think it's great!"

Konoha asked in embarrassment while Haruaki answered, a little intimidated. How unexpected. Konoha normally did not wear frilly clothing; the pure white apron also had a different design compared to the one she usually wore in the kitchen, thus enhancing the feeling of innocence; the combination of twin braids, glasses and hair band was quite refreshing; furthermore—very subtly, perhaps because the size did not fit, the bulge of her bosom seemed even more conspicuous than usual...

"Is that so... Very well. Ehehe."

Konoha replied shyly, seeming a bit happy. Zenon nodded with satisfaction as she examined her from behind. Throughout the process, Shiraho remained indifferent while Sovereignty casually smiled, saying "Now we're dressed identically!" As for the two remaining girls—at some point in time, Fear and Kuroe had gone off to crouch in a corner of the beauty parlor, hugging their knees as they glared viciously at the impromptu maid while muttering:

"Honestly, Kono-san's assets are too cheating."

"Rather than cheating, let's call it abnormal. Think about it, don't those giant pumpkins or human-sized turnips you see on television belong to the same category? They're simply shocking abnormalities—or let's put it this way, although they would amaze people with their novelty, stirring up a sensation for one time, ultimately people will grow tired and forget them. Absolutely."

"People like us are called normal. We are definitely not 'lacking.' Instead, we possess modesty and elegance... Indeed, this is the mark of a lady. Simply stated, our bosoms could be described as ladylike."

"Wanna form a Ladylike Bosoms Alliance? The only one flatter than me—correction, the only other ladylike bosom belongs to you. Together we will condemn Cow Tit's udders!"

Giving off an inexplicable sense of frustration, the two girls looked at each other expressionlessly and shook hands weakly.

At this moment, the shop's glass door opened softly with the entrance of a lady who was as tall as a model. Her only jewelry was a silver cross hanging over her chest which matched her casual look of shirt and jeans quite well. Judging from her dyed, rainbow-colored hair, perhaps she really could be a real model.

"Excuse me... Is the shop open? Or am I too early?"

Naturally, Kuroe responded immediately. Glancing at the wall clock, she replied:

"Although you're a bit early, it's fine... Welcome. Did you happen to bring a flyer?"

"No, I didn't. I was simply looking for a place on the street for a haircut because I suddenly felt like it. Is there a problem with not having a flyer?"

"No—because you're the first customer after our grand reopening, I'll give you special treatment even if you don't have one. The flyer is actually a discount coupon, but I'll offer you the same deal just for you."

"Oh really? I'm so lucky! I was simply thinking that a grand reopening was a good omen, so I came in for a look... Yes, looks like I made the right choice. Because I only came to this town due to work, I'm not too clear on which shops are better."

"Thank you. The 'Dan-no-ura' prides itself on being the number one beauty parlor in service quality and technique on occasion. Please come this way..."

While leading the customer with strange sales talk, Kuroe threw Haruaki a glance. Hurry up and pull in more customers—That's what she meant, right?

So that was the basic situation. Without any special mighty roaring, nor any cheering of raised fists—

The "Dan-no-ura" beauty parlor reopened feebly without a bang.

—Perhaps a result of the flyers handed out the previous day, customers arrived successively after the first one. For a dash at the starting line, these numbers were not bad at all.

During this time, Haruaki and company walked in the neighborhood to pass flyers to passersby. Of course, Konoha was still wearing the maid outfit while Sovereignty also ran over enthusiastically to support her, saying "Let me help a bit!" Who knew if it was due to the novelty of maids or the outfit's design emphasizing a certain part of Konoha's body, quite a lot of people accepted the flyers... In response to this supposedly good news, someone was quite displeased.

"Muu... What is the meaning of this!? Accepting flyers from Cow Tits but not from me! Damn it, her flyers are going much faster than mine..."

"Pleased to meet you—Hey Fear, what's with the sour look? It's not like it matters."

"Of course it matters! This is a competition to see who is better, me or her!"

Roaring back at Haruaki, Fear rushed into the crowd with reckless abandon. However, her irrepressible rage, unnatural smile and excessive forcefulness only ended up counterproductive. "Uwah, a foreigner! A super scary one!" Elementary schoolers cried and fled for their lives. But immediately afterwards, they readily accepted Konoha's flyers that were delivered with a gentle smile and a message of "Please come and have a look when you have the opportunity." Not only that, but as though something had awakened in their hearts, the students watched the maid disappear with mesmerized eyes. Witnessing this scene, Fear trembled in fury.

"Damn it...! Unforgivable, unforgivable... In that case...!"

After wallowing in displeasure for a while, Fear suddenly shoved her flyers towards Haruaki and ran away.

"Hey Fear, what's the matter?"

"I'm going to Kuroe's shop! I'll be right back!"

They were currently located a few dozen meters outside of the shopping street. Well, she shouldn't get lost at this distance... Haruaki thought to himself, and just as Fear promised, it only took her five minutes to return.

...Wearing the Chinese dress.

"Y-You...!"

"Ooh... This dress exposes my legs completely... Whatever, since things have come to this, I don't care anymore!"

Although Konoha's maid outfit was quite refreshing, Fear in the Chinese dress was also quite a striking sight. Who knew what the superintendent was thinking, the slits on the two sides were outrageously high, to the point that Fear's hips flashed in and out of view. Naturally, Fear's thighs were on full display as if loudly publicizing their snowy whiteness. The front part of the dress was quite long and almost reached the ground because of Fear's

short stature. But incredibly, this looked even more vulnerable than an ordinary skirt despite the dress clearly having more area of fabric...

"I'm not going to care, but—Hey, stop staring! I-I'll curse you!"

"Oh? If you don't want to be watched, why are you wearing it?"

Blushing intensely, Fear used both hands to press down on the fabric over her lower body. However, this ended up being counterproductive, only serving to expose more of her thighs from the slits on the side.

Fear remained struggling awkwardly in embarrassment for a while, but finally puffed out her chest and pouted as if she accepted things. Glaring at Haruaki, she asked:

"So... How is it? Haruaki!"

"H-How is what?"

"Basically... Compared to Cow Tits, who is cuter... No wait, how should I put this, basically... Am I inferior—in terms of power to make people accept flyers, how am I right now?"

"I don't quite get what kind of power you mean by that, but... You're not inferior, okay? As long as you work hard, the flyers will be distributed... Yeah."



"So we're equals, huh? Whatever—Then all that's left is a battle of vigor! I won't lose!"

"Uwah, wait a minute! Fear, smile! Don't forget to smile more naturally!"

"Yeah I know already!"

With the dress' slits offering glimpses of her thighs, Fear carried the flyers as she rushed off to search for people—Only now did Haruaki notice Shiraho who had been standing there with a displeased expression. She was supposed to be at the beauty parlor, so when did she come here?

"You only noticed now? Clearly your eyes see nothing but Chinese dresses, depraved human."

"Y-You're wrong! Anyway, did Fear cause some kind of trouble...?"

Shiraho's beautiful visage turned into a sneer:

"What is this trouble you speak of? Indeed, if asking a human, who isn't really a friend, for assistance in changing counts as trouble, perhaps so? But insolent fellows of that sort could not possibly exist in this world, so this does not count as trouble. Indeed, being suddenly photographed by a child-like hairstylist on my first encounter doesn't really count as trouble. Surely it must be a local custom passed down the generations in some land, one that I should thank from the bottom of my heart, isn't that so?"

"Your words are mercilessly scathing as usual... Anyway, I'll apologize to you on their behalf. I am truly sorry. Say, what was that about being photographed?"

"They were saying something about putting up a poster at the entrance that would give the viewer a feeling of 'I'll become this beautiful at this shop!' Naturally, the instant I heard them, I requested for them to delete the file."

"It would be 100% dishonest advertising! Anyway, let me apologize for this as well... And then? Why did you come running here?"

"Do you really believe that I am helping to rope in customers? Exceedingly foolish human."

Shiraho scoffed at the idea. At this moment, Sovereignty, who had been passing out flyers, leaned over and said: "Oh, it's Shiraho~ This job is so fun! I feel so happy when passersby accept the flyers!" Shiraho nodded

and answered: "That's wonderful." Then without any explanation, she grabbed Sovereignty's arm, tossed her flyers over to Haruaki and started walking, dragging Sovereignty with her.

"Enough already, right? Let's go."

"Eh? But I still want to help more? Why..."

"Never mind all that! The secretary has already left and the task the man assigned is already done... Today's itinerary never included all this in the first place!"

"Uh—Where are you two off to? Going home already?"

Haruaki asked as he watched the maid's back recede while she was being dragged. Shiraho silently turned her head back sharply, displaying a dangerous gaze as if she would murder anyone who reached out towards them:

"A date. Get in my way and I'll slaughter you, human."

"—Have fun."

Haruaki could only answer that way. Sovereignty cheerfully waved and said: "Please send my regards to Kuroe-chan~" while Shiraho dragged her off.

Fear, who had been running about, happened to pass by them: "Ohoh, you're leaving? Thanks for your help, it feels great, see you next time!" Narrowing her eyes in response to the astounding exposure of Fear's running thighs, Shiraho grumbled briefly:

"...Have you no fear? Whatever, none of my business."

What did she mean? Haruaki tilted his head in puzzlement as he watched Shiraho leave without looking back, dragging Sovereignty with her.

Feeling rather concerned, Haruaki turned to check Fear's appearance again. She still looked the same, her snow-white legs flashing as she ran all over the place. For some reason, the sight made him sweat nervously. It must be the fault of those slits, high enough to expose the hips— Hmm, isn't there something strange somewhere? Only now did Haruaki notice, what was actually beneath—Because no matter how much he pondered over it, judging from the height of the slits—Then, could it be... No way—

Recalling the way Fear pressed down on the fabric, Haruaki pondered Shiraho's question of "Have you no fear?"

Then a possibility surfaced in his mind but Haruaki smiled with a twitching face and immediately abandoned the notion. Impossible, totally impossible. It could not be true no matter what. Shiraho must have taught Fear some kind of secret technique which boys could never imagine. Surely that must be the case.

Under these conditions, Haruaki stopped pondering about the mysterious slits and resumed passing out flyers again. But from this point onwards, he became extremely concerned with Fear's movements.

Noon came and went imperceptibly and it was the appointed time for the group to gather provisionally. Fear laughed eerily as she went "Fufufu, I gave out so many!" Konoha examined her and murmured: "What slender legs... No, the legs of little children are supposed to be slender." Together with these two girls, Haruaki returned to the "Dan-no-ura."

They were confronted with an astounding sight as soon as they reached the shop's entrance. A photo of Shiraho, the indisputable super beauty, had been magnified and pasted on the door. Written on the poster were the words: "I frequently patronize the Dan-no-ura. You too, can become beautiful here!"—Haruaki felt that it relied mostly on selling appearances. Given what Shiraho had said, this picture was most likely taken in secret after she asked them to delete the first one, and then magnified at a photo finishing shop.

Feeling speechless towards Kuroe's business spirit, Haruaki entered the beauty parlor to find the sofa full of customers lined up in waiting. It looked like Shiraho's photo was quite effective in drawing customers.

"Welcome back, let's eat upstairs. After the meal, Haru, could you please help man the cash register?"

Busy with the scissors, Kuroe threw a glance at Haruaki and the girls. In order not to disturb her work, Haruaki and company acknowledged her words through action by making their way towards the room on the second floor.

But at this moment—something happened.

In a certain sense, what happened was only natural. As a shop opened for business, it was only natural for customers to enter the door. Simple as that. However—

"Ara ara, what booming business... I would title this 'A Rebirth Full of Blessing.' Yes~ So all I need to do is register my name here?"

Indeed, the customer was the suspicious stalker woman.

Part 2

"...What kind of haircut would you like?"

"Just trim it suitably. Whether length or style, I leave everything completely in your hands."

"Since you've kept your hair this long already, cutting it short would be a shame. How about trimming it to waist length?"

"Let's do that."

Alice smiled back affectionately through the mirror. Kuroe sighed and began to take her scissors to task, producing the faint and pleasant sounds from the severing of hair by metal.

"Jeez, how did it come to this...?"

"We can't help it. Kuroe said it was fine."

Despite answering the displeased Fear in this manner, Haruaki harbored doubts himself. Like the way she suddenly tied up Fear in bondage, Kuroe had a belligerent side to her and Haruaki had not expected her to cut the enemy's hair so obediently.

(Hmm... Perhaps in front of other customers, we can't really drive her away just like that.)

Haruaki and the rest kept the door leading to the back of the shop ajar and peeked through the gap to observe Kuroe and Alice's situation. She held true to her words of "Today I am simply a customer" that she had declared when Haruaki and the girls readied themselves for battle in response to her arrival. Instead of the nun's habit, she was wearing casual clothing today. Neither was she carrying the large musical instrument case. While waiting in line, she simply flipped through fashion magazines curiously to pass time, suddenly looking up to smile at Fear and others from time to time.

"Is she planning something?"

"Doesn't look like it... Perhaps because we are monitoring things here, she might not do anything."

Fear and Konoha whispered among themselves. Meanwhile, Kuroe and Alice's conversation could be heard faintly.

"It's been so long since I've let someone cut my hair. It feels so delightful."

"...Really? But your hair is so pretty, cutting it feels delightful to me too."

As the two chatted away casually, Kuroe worked nonstop while Alice's smile remained constant. This continued for dozens of minutes. Then for the first time, Alice stopped smiling.

"Snore... Snore..."

"I can't believe it, she fell asleep!"

"Or should I point out her total lack of danger awareness? ...I really don't get this person."

"The fact that she hasn't really done anything special so we are not motivated to take this opportunity to strike back... If she actually reasoned in this manner, she'd be quite a character. But if she didn't consider anything at all, then she's nothing more than a fool."

In truth, Haruaki and his companions were quite irritated. Alice's stated goals were to "Please come with me no matter what, should you refuse, I would have to resort to force." These were undoubtedly the words of an "enemy." However—currently nodding off to sleep while her hair was being cut, she really did not give off any hostile impression. All one could see was a gentle, calm and composed lady who smiled appropriately. Nothing more than that.

All sorts of questions occupied Haruaki's mind. Was she really an enemy? Targeting Kuroe earlier and now intending to abduct Fear instead, was there some sort of underlying reason? And if so, what kind of reason was it? Ultimately, what sort of organization was the Bivorio Family? "An organization greatly resembling the Yachi family"—Was Alice's explanation really true? —Haruaki could not understand any of this.

"Done."

"...Hmm. Ara ara—Did I fall asleep? My apologies, it was too comfortable."

"As a matter of procedure, please check your hairstyle."

Kuroe held a mirror behind Alice, allowing her to check the back view. After a simple glance at her hair which had been shortened by a few dozen centimeters, Alice happily nodded affirmatively:

"Wow, the hair ends look much prettier than before! As expected of Kuroe-sama."

"Thanks for the praise—Haru, would you please prepare her bill. Hmm... Next customer please."

"O-Oh okay, got it."

There were many customers in line after Alice. Giving Kuroe a sideways glance as she busied herself serving the next customer, Haruaki walked over to the cash register. Fear and Konoha also followed him nonchalantly.

"Keep the change. Think of this as a celebratory gift for the opening."

"...No, you're just a customer. We can't accept that from customers. Here, this is your change."

"Really? Then see you next time—especially Fear-sama."

Don't come again—Fear almost shouted out, but suppressed herself seeing as there were other customers on the sofa. Smiling tenderly as she watched Fear pout, Alice nodded lightly and left the shop.

She could not be allowed to escape just like that. Their hands were tied while inside the shop, but there were still a mountain of questions to ask. Haruaki, Fear and Konoha rushed out the door together—

"W-Wait up! Let's talk!"

"Ara ara, what would you like to talk about? Have you finally decided to come over to us?"

"Hmph—Of course not! I just want to learn about your goals in greater detail. Not something ludicrous like 'having tea together' but your real goals!"

As Alice looked back over her shoulder, her monocle flashed brightly. Her eyes looked as though she were gazing at a troublesome and willful child.

"I don't consider my words ludicrous... My utmost apologies. I fear that now is not the right time, so if you want details, please wait until—"

"Time? I am asking you right now what you mean! Even if it means resorting to force—"

"Hey, hold your horses, Fear! Could you pay a little attention to the bystanders!?"

Haruaki's reminder caused Fear to gnash her teeth as she halted her hand that was reaching into the pocket of her Chinese dress.

"...There's no need to be impatient. You'll know eventually. That is why I am here."

"Since we'll know eventually, telling us now is the same, isn't it?"

Beneath Konoha's severe glare, Alice shook her head gently:

"Not exactly. There exists something known as timing—Oh, but I suddenly remembered something. It would be troublesome should you get the wrong idea, so allow me to state this first for the record."

Then looking at Haruaki, Konoha and Fear in turn, she declared unambiguously:

"The culprit is me."

A totally incomprehensible line.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"This too, is something you'll understand eventually... Well then, I shall take my leave here today. Please convey thanks to Kuroe-sama on my behalf."

Saying that on her own, she left. Haruaki wanted to chase after her, but a new customer happened to arrive, asking "Excuse, how long would it take if I queued right now?" Distracted for a few seconds to handle the customer's question, Haruaki discovered Alice had disappeared from sight by the time he turned his attention back to her. Although Fear and Konoha went searching, they returned quickly, unable to find clues.

The culprit is me—What did this sentence mean? What was going to happen next? Or perhaps, had some kind of incident occurred already? A major incident that would require the existence of a "culprit"—

For quite a while, Haruaki silently gazed into the distance where Alice had disappeared.

In the depths of his heart, he felt a vague and ambiguous but undeniable and inexplicable eeriness.

(Since I was getting a haircut there anyway, I should have asked to cut it shorter...)

I'll just have to go again in the next few days—She thought to herself. After all, she would definitely enjoy it.

Despite only cutting off a few dozen centimeters, her hair felt much lighter than before. Feeling refreshed, Alice strolled as she allowed her shortened hair to flutter in the wind. Her visit to the shop was originally intended as a small surprise, but she had not expected a long overdue haircut to feel so pleasurable.

(Yes, it really has been quite a while since my last haircut...)

She recalled the memories from that "home" when friends had helped her cut her hair. It was so very long ago. That girl who existed no longer, what was her name? E... Yes, Elena. A girl with beautiful blonde hair who was adopted together with Alice from the agency. Of course Alice remembered her, because she was family too.

They had often played together. Having learnt how to draw using fragments of charcoal, Alice would often find Elena behind her, peeking at what she was drawing. Then she would ask... How should this picture be titled, Alice?

Thinking back now, were her drawings so ugly that they could not be recognized without a title? This would hardly be surprising, seeing as they were the drawings of a child. Also, there were no colors except for the black of charcoal. Photography had become very convenient in recent times, with cameras offering far more functionality than paintbrushes. However, it still felt nice to pick up a paintbrush now and then.

"Ah yes... It would be great to ask her to be my model. Drinking hot milk as I invite her to sit on a chair in the garden..."

Her thoughts wandering aimlessly, Alice was murmuring to herself. She could not help but smile wryly as soon as she realized what she was doing.

These thoughts were premature. Next, there were clearly many tasks which needed to be done first.

Indeed, the preliminary work for preparations were complete. Next she must take to task the direct preparations for inviting the girl.

Alice continued to walk with light footsteps. She discovered a roadside cafe with a nice atmosphere. Did cafes in this country offer hot milk? What a worrying question.

But first, there was work. She shall visit a cafe after her task was done!

The task was very simple but required precise execution and did not allow for carelessness.

(Very well, time to start what I need to do!)

In order to settle down, she warned herself. Walking without pause, she made her way towards the warehouse serving as her secret base. The tools must be prepared first. She continued to tell herself:

Very well, let suffering be granted! Very well, let drama be pursued! Very well, let understanding be whispered!

Very well—let me become the culprit!

Part 3

After eight in the evening, when the "Dan-no-ura" closed for the day, a simple celebration party was held with the shopkeepers in the shopping street. A few long tables were moved into the shop where food and drinks had been prepared in the style of a buffet party.

"Allow me to express my gratitude, everyone. It's all thanks to your efforts that so many customers came today. I'll try my best from now on, so please treat me well. So... Cheers!"

"Cheers! Hurray—!"

Spearheaded by Kuroe, the scene instantly became lively and bustling. With the superintendent's gift of alcoholic drinks opened generously, the adult-oriented smell of alcohol filled the narrow confines of the shop.

Drinking juice from a paper cup, Fear leaned her back against the wall, already changed out of the Chinese dress. She was thinking about the matter of Alice—The culprit is me. What did she intend by saying that?

Incomprehensible. However—in a certain sense, it did not matter at all. If anything happened to threaten her companions, she would put a stop to it; if it turned out to be harmless, she would simply ignore it. Besides, no matter what threats the enemy made, Fear had no intention of going along with that woman. Alice's efforts were meaningless from the very start.

Fear's home was here. She would live here in order to lift her curse. This was already decided.

Indeed... To lift her curse.

Fear looked up. Konoha, who had mentioned on their first encounter that her curse was almost lifted, was currently harassing Haruaki with tears glistening in her eyes.

"Hey, what are you thinking, what are you thinking right now, Haruaki-kun? Do you wonder if that woman makes my character redundant!? Or perhaps you are thinking, wouldn't life be wonderful to be embraced by someone like that, a gentle big sister type who speaks using polite language!?"

"Wait... What are you talking about? Hmm, I guess her manner of speaking does resemble yours a bit, but that woman is someone to be wary of, why would anyone want to be embraced by her..."

"Liar! While we were monitoring her, that was what your eyes were saying, Haruaki-kun! Oooooh~ Am I no good? Clearly I am always close by your side, caring for you, hoping to embrace you tightly... How heartbreaking. Too heartbreaking! And come on, this place is too hot! You're not going to be satisfied unless I strip, is that it!?"

Go, sistah, go go go! An irresponsible clamor started up in the surroundings.

"Wah—! Woah, I was about to ask why you're acting weird... But isn't that souchuu highball^[3] in your cup!? Did you mistakenly drink that by accident or on purpose!?"

"Ooh... Another refill please... Is there any plum brandy here~ I love that stuff."

"No! A-Absolutely no plum brandy for you! I already know you enter a special drunken madness whenever you drink that!"

"Eh—That's not true... Well then, top or bottom, which would you find more exciting to strip?"

"Don't strip at all!"



What a commotion. Meanwhile, Kuroe, whose curse was already lifted, was—

"Kawasaki-san, the lunchboxes were very tasty, thank you."

"R-Really? I'm so glad to hear that from you, Kuroe-chan! Would you say that my shop's food was the most valuable contribution this time? I-If that's the case, please rub my head as a reward...!"

"You're the greatest. You're the greatest."

"Ah... So soothing... You look even younger than my kid at home, how unbelievable..."

"Oi! That's totally unfair, Kawasaki bastard! Say, Kuroe-chan, do remember that food is gone once it's eaten. But beautiful flowers not only soothe customers' souls but also keep their gazes captured, so my flower shop's contributions should be the most...!"

"Hey, Kuroe-chan said just now that my shop's eggplant with miso beancurd is very delicious! So after a day's work, the one responsible for the most soothing is me instead!"

Surrounded by the biggest crowd, Kuroe seemed to be slightly relaxing her always expressionless face, apparently delighted. Everyone was chatting happily while smiling in bliss.

It looked like a joyous occasion. So this was a social circle of "humans." Here, Kuroe "who was originally a doll" had naturally become a part of them, getting along in harmony. This made Fear feel... exceptionally—

(If I lift my curse and become even more human than now... Will I be able to smile like that? To be able to live among crowds naturally like that?)

Fear admitted she was quite impressed.

At the same time, she was also quite jealous.

(Jealousy? How inane.)

But before her eyes was a wonderful sight that she desired very very much. However, it was something she could not obtain the way she was currently. And whether or not she could achieve it in the future, she had no idea—Well then, the sight of something enjoyed by someone else and this tightening feeling in her chest, perhaps calling it jealousy was right after all.

"...Fear? What's with you, why are you staring off blankly over here?"

Haruaki approached at this time. Fear turned back to find Konoha dozing off, hugging a table.

"Umm... Nothing much."

"How strange, I was expecting you to rush over for authentic rice crackers from the Japanese snacks shop? And there's so many things I don't think you've ever eaten before. They'll be gone if you don't hurry, you know?"

"You're... right. Go over and just pick out some rice crackers and the like for me."

"Go get them yourself, don't be so lazy... Oh I see, you..."

Haruaki made a face as if he realized something, then sighed and scratched his head.

"I see what's going on now... Okay, see as that's the case! Shoo shoo, if you want food, then get it yourself!"

"Mwah, don't push, okay!?"

Pushed from behind, Fear found herself coming into close proximity with Kuroe's adult crowd that she had difficulty joining in. Then one of the shopkeepers, reeking of alcohol, turned his red and drunken face towards Fear:

"Oh yeah! By the way, let's not forget this child's hardworking efforts! You showed us something really nice!"

"Eh?"

"That's totally right! Come over here! Whaddya wanna eat? I recommend this sashimi from my shop!"

"Try these pickled vegetables as well! My store's vegetables are always very fresh!"

"That Chinese dress of yours, would you like to have it washed at my shop? Also... Maybe you could work part-time at my place next time? After all, the bookstore stole Kono-chan from me. The special perk of working at my place is that you get to wear all sorts of cute outfits I've collected—"

"You'll end up in all sorts of photos if you go to that guy's shop, so I'd advise against it! My place sells only croquettes, so why not come to mine? In fact, I'll even take you in as my child!"

Shouting one after another, the crowd started speaking to Fear with intimidating enthusiasm. Fear anxiously turned to look at Haruaki, only to discover that he had turned his gaze away as if the situation did not concern him.

"Umm... Uh, what should I say..."

"Yes, Ficchi, I am also much indebted to your efforts, thank you."

Kuroe brought forth a bottle of juice and refilled Fear's empty cup with what she had been drinking.

"I'm sure everyone loves Ficchi already, so there's no need to think too much. Just be happy."

Kuroe discreetly whispered in Fear's ear, prompting her to look back at Kuroe. Incredibly, the color of profundity could be seen from her blank eyes. Indeed—come on over—Kuroe seemed to be silently inviting her.

The pain was not gone. Painful emotions had not disappeared. Yet only at this moment—

Fear felt that even given her current self, she at least had the right to step one foot into this crowd.

Slowly, Fear poured the contents of her paper cup into her mouth.

Despite clearly being the same juice, somehow it tasted much sweeter than before.

That night, while Fear was in the bath, the glass door was slid open again, accompanied by someone's strange declaration of "Hello, I am the steam thief!" Obviously, the new arrival was blank-faced Kuroe.

"...You're here again."

Fear sighed and shrank herself into a corner of the bathtub. Kuroe inclined her head and said:

"Eh? You're not going to protest?"

"You're still entering even if I protest, right? I already learned my lesson yesterday."

Hearing Fear's answer, Kuroe relaxed her face slightly.

"Yes, but today is different. I just want to scrub your back as thanks—Come on out! I will be very gentle, dear customer."

"Nwah?"

Fear was grabbed by the arm and forcibly pulled out of the tub. By the time she realized, she had already spun several times and was seated on the plastic stool. She did not know why, but she arched her back without feeling any intention to resist. She could feel Kuroe's outstretched hands touching her back—the sensation of tiny palms. Her back was lathered with soap suds while her skin was gently scrubbed.

"How is it?"

"Mmm... Hmm, not bad."

To be honest, it was quite comfortable. Fear even started feeling sleepy at some point and blinked. Had the person behind her noticed?

"...Are you tired today?"

"It's okay, after all, it was my first time... But it was a very good experience. Speaking of tired, you must have worked a lot harder than me, right? Because it's a service industry—you have to face human strangers..."

"It's nothing once you get used to it."

"Used to it... huh..."

Arching her back, Fear sighed. Who knew if it was because of the palms she felt on her back, the steam pervading the bathroom, or the sleepiness—Fear found her lips speaking on their own.

"You're so amazing..."

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

"...Nothing much."

Fear tried to cover it up. After finishing with the back scrubbing, Kuroe proceeded to do Fear's hair, generously offering her professional hair washing technique, saying it was a return favor for yesterday.

"Fufu... Silver-colored and silky smooth, how pretty. Although I like my own hair a lot, it still makes me somewhat jealous."

Jealousy. That was what Fear actually wanted to say.

Indeed, what she tried to cover up, was her admiration for Kuroe as well as the jealousy she felt during the celebration party.

But now, as her sleepiness intensified during the process of hair washing, what Fear felt was neither admiration nor jealousy, but a subtly different emotion. Through Kuroe's hands which gently caressed her hair, the two emotions were combined, diluted and blended into a new emotion. That was what Fear felt.

What was it? A sense of embarrassment and itching in her heart, this feeling directed towards Kuroe—what on earth was it?

Fear did not know the words to describe this feeling. Without resisting her heavy eyelids, she comfortably succumbed to the beckoning of sleep.

Then she fell asleep, casting all thoughts from her mind. This included the doubts she felt and the sensations of the finger gently caressing her hair.

Also including something warmer than admiration, more genuine than jealousy—

One might even name it "aspiration"—An answer.

Part 4

"Hwah... Oomm."

The next morning, Haruaki yawned and stretched as he sat on the edge of the veranda, drinking hot tea. In terms of the clock, this was much earlier than his usual wake up time. The reason for his early rise was the scene unfolding before his eyes in the garden.

"Come on, one, two, three, four!"

"Nnu... Ku... Hah...!"

"Okay, stop! Whenever I call out 'four,' you should have returned to your starting position! Why are you the only one standing more and more forward!?"

"Sh-Shut up, I know already!"

"Then let's go again. Come on, one, two, three, four!"

"Hoh... Hoh... Hoh... Ohoh! How's that now? I did it! In your face, Cow Tits!"

"What are you showing off to me for? I don't understand at all... Besides, you failed. It's pointless if your arms don't move at the same time!"

"D-Damn it...! Argh! One more time!"

"...How peaceful."

Watching the two practice, Haruaki sipped tea like an old man.

The current situation stemmed from Fear requesting Konoha to help her with an early morning dance practice. It went without saying, due to the hindrance of Fear's pride, it was not so much a "request" as a result of a convoluted series of happenings... In the end, exasperated by Fear's slow progress, Konoha had no choice but to sigh and agree, thus resulting in the present circumstances. That said, Haruaki had no idea at all why he was roped into this as well.

A series of clanging noises caused Haruaki to look up. Kuroe was descending the staircase on the side of the accessory dwelling. Her usual blank gaze currently displayed genuine sleepiness instead. Walking past the two girls as she carried a surprised expression, Kuroe commented:

"...What a truly strange dance. It looks like it could very well be a ritual for summoning an elder god."

"I'm practicing for a creative dance, okay! Right, why don't you come and try reading this thing out!? Cow Tits here keeps leveraging her instructor position to subject me to verbal abuse... Using this opportunity to make the most of her underhanded ways, enjoying unbounded thrills from this!"

"W-What do you mean by enjoying unbounded thrills!? Let me tell you this, it would not be practicing if I don't point out what you're doing wrong, that is why I am saying you are—"

"Oh~ I get it, Kono-san is sometimes like that, a girl who enjoys boundless thrills."

"What is this agreement from an unexpected source!?"

"Hmph... See, there's nothing worse than a deviant lacking in self awareness. In any case, I shall not submit to the tyranny of Cow Tits no matter what."

"Wow, Ficchi is so amazing. Then I'm heading to breakfast... Do your best."

"Yes!"

Encouraged by a few easy words of support, Fear responded with a thumbs-up; Kuroe raised her thumb in return. Observing their dialogue, Haruaki realized with an "Oh?"—Why did Fear and Kuroe's relationship seem to have subtly improved? Although he had no idea why, it was a good change after all.

"...Good morning, Haru."

"Yeah, breakfast is in the kitchen. It's just bacon, egg and bread, however."

"Got it~"

Kuroe entered the house through the veranda. Taking the plate prepared for her from the kitchen to the living room, she switched on the television while holding a piece of toast in her mouth.

"...Now for the next news story. During the early hours of last night, the strange corpse of a young woman was discovered in the streets of Hitsutou City. No further details are available at this stage, but police investigations are currently underway, treating it as a homicide—"

The voice from the television reported unsettling news that took place in this city, prompting Haruaki to feel concerned. He turned to take a glance at the television, but the screen had already moved on to the next story.

(A homicide case huh...)

An ominous feeling filled his heart again. Naturally—it was what he had felt when he heard the word "culprit." But he tried to convince himself—I'm worrying too much. This was simply an ordinary case unrelated to those people.

"Phew... Well then, please perform the next dance move... Jump up, then do this with your arms."

In the garden, Konoha was still instructing Fear. Konoha was by nature quite a caring person. But on the other hand, Fear refused to follow Konoha's motions, simply watching with her eyes narrowed. What on earth was she staring at? Following her line of sight—

(Hmm...)

Konoha was jumping up and down. A certain mass was also wobbling inside her t-shirt, undulating like waves, appearing to struggle violently, leaping, quivering, quaking, bouncing as if showing off its size and suppleness...

"Very well, something with that kind of feeling. How about you try it as well, Fear-san..."

"...Fugah—!"

"Kyah! W-Why are you suddenly angry—?"

"Sh-Shut up! I'll curse you! Those things of yours are such an affront to the eyes, take this! Deflate!"

"Nnn, kyah...! Hey, why are you being so violent... I-I'm going to get mad now!"

Uwah... Haruaki watched the scene with a lukewarm gaze but Kuroe suddenly got up from watching television.

After giving the news a final glance, she took out the piece of bread from her mouth, returned it to the plate and walked out.

"What's the matter?"

Putting on the sandals she had taken off on the veranda, Kuroe narrowed her incomparably serious eyes and replied to Haruaki:

"The Ladylike Bosoms Alliance will not ignore a comrade in need. I will assist her."

"...What?"

Then approaching the squabbling pair, Kuroe imitated Fear and cried out: "Deflate!" Opening and closing her fingers like claws, she pounced on Konoha's bosom.

Then the day began. At school, classes drew to a close as usual, but that only applied to ordinary students. From Haruaki's perspective, some matters were making him concerned.

First there was Kirika. Naturally, she was pretending that things were normal, but her unwell state was easily visible. Her face looked a little red and she would even space out to the point of forgetting instructions in class. Perhaps she had a flu.

More concerning was the second matter—Indeed, it happened the second lessons ended. It was after the bell rang to signal the end of the school day.

"Oh, another weird case? I smell a mystery here."

"Hmm? Taizou, what are you reading?"

Haruaki's inattentive question elicited an answer from Taizou who was surfing the net on his cellphone. He was reading a report on a news website. This was the beginning of the matter that made Haruaki concerned—or rather, a matter that drew nothing but alarm.

"Didn't the morning news on television report the discovery of a corpse from a strange death? Supposedly, the victim was folded into the shape of a cube. Good heavens, is there some meaning behind it?"

The culprit is me.

Afterwards, Haruaki summoned Fear and Konoha to gather on the roof where there were no others and told them what he had heard from Taizou. Konoha's face instantly turned grim.

"I see... With this kind of timing... Perhaps the two could be related."

"No, let's not be too hasty. I just thought I should tell you two about the news, but there's nothing so far to indicate that woman's participation in the crime. It could be coincidence, right?"

"But if the case really turns out to be related to me..."

Fear gnashed her teeth and stared at the rooftop's concrete floor. Her gaze trembled as though she was enduring something. At the same time, she shouted forcefully as if in so much pain she was about to vomit blood—

"It means someone died because of me, someone unrelated, whose face I don't even know!"

"Hey wait a minute, Fear, don't go jumping to conclusions so easily! Besides, there's no reason for that woman to do this kind of thing..."

"Reason? Isn't it obvious! She must be trying to convey this kind of message—'If you don't accept my invitation, I will kill completely unrelated people!'"

"Wha—"

"...This is terrorism."

Haruaki was speechless. Konoha's glare seemed to be sharp as knives. Fear hyperventilated as if she had asthma, her fists clenched so tightly they were about to creak.

Haruaki shared their sentiments. To think she would go so far... Why choose to go about things this way? If the case really turned out as speculated, then it was completely unforgivable and the culprit could not be allowed to roam unpunished.

However—there was no tangible evidence yet. Was that woman with the gentle smile really capable of something like this? To this point, Haruaki's mind still could not accept this completely. Nevertheless—

"No matter what... We can't ignore it."

"Of course. Let's go find that woman!"

Fear remained silent, tightly clenching her fists. But her downwards gazing head bobbed up and down in response.

A conclusion was reached. Although there were no clues yet, it was better than doing nothing.

Just as the group prepared to leave, the door to the roof suddenly opened with a metallic screech.

"...So you're here."

"Oh hi, Class Rep."

Kirika had appeared. Her face still looked unwell and her voice lacked vigor. Seeing her hand still on the door handle, Haruaki suspected she was having trouble standing.

"I was trying to find you. You are my assistant, so if you run around randomly... I'll be very troubled."

Haruaki had forgotten due to the sudden developments, but he was also supposed to be preparing for the sports festival as well today. What a dilemma—Haruaki thought—Then he noticed another troublesome situation. Three people were not quite enough manpower for finding someone who was wandering the streets. What should he do? It seemed like it would be a good idea to attempt asking her for assistance. If she declined on grounds of having no obligations to help out, then so be it.

"U-Ummm... Class Rep, I'm having a bit of trouble right now... Today, umm... May I be excused from the sport festivals' preparations today?"

"What did you say?"

"Also, umm... I know it's unreasonable for me to ask for this kind of thing, but if possible... Really, only if it's possible, I'd like to make a request of you, Class Rep. There's this woman out on the streets I must find no matter what..."

"—Wait."

Kirika held out her hand to interrupt Haruaki. Showing her palm towards Haruaki, she painfully turned her gaze away. After taking several breaths, as if recalling a certain incident engraved in the depths of her heart, she spoke with an unsteady gaze:

"I'm sorry... I can't help you with anything this time. My apologies."

"Eh? Ah... Oh ok, you really don't have to apologize, Class Rep. After all, it's just my unreasonable request. Yeah, your work must have been quite busy lately, right?"

"That's not the issue... No, you're right. Indeed so."

Kirika's expression grew increasingly gloomy as she murmured without looking up. Haruaki could vaguely hear her breathing becoming louder.

"Say... Are you really okay? You've been looking like this all day—Right, I'm so stupid! How could I even think of asking you to go out, Class Rep!? Have you caught a flu? If it's really acting up, you'd better go to the infirmary..."

"No, it's nothing. I'm fine."

Kirika stood up straight. Only then did she finally gaze into Haruaki's eyes directly.

"Anyway, do you intend to be excused from today's preparations? Seeing as we cannot afford to waste a single day at this point, this is quite irresponsible of you as the executive committee's assistant—But I shall turn a blind eye this once. Same for Fear and Konoha, let me inform Kana on your behalf."

"Yeah, that's right. I am really sorry."

Before Haruaki finished saying these words, Kirika had already turned around to leave the roof.

—As if fleeing from something.

Kirika halted in middle of the staircase. Although she clearly had to get away, not knowing when Haruaki's group was coming down, her legs would not move. Not only that, her body was also swaying unsteadily, having lost its sense of balance. She leaned her back against the wall.

"Hoo... Hoo..."

She clenched her fist tight. Ahhh... Ahhh, how painful. Suppressing "that activity" was so painful. Damn it. If she wanted to, she could do it immediately, so long as nobody saw. Yes, regardless whether it was a washroom or a—

Just as she realized what she was considering, Kirika regained her senses and slapped herself hard on the cheek. At this moment—

"Hmph, looks like you've kept up your end of the promise. Excellent."

"Himura..."

Lower down the staircase was a man she did not wish to see. He must have eavesdropped on the rooftop conversation.

"Anyway, let's put that issue aside for now. I don't suppose you're actually trying to endure that?"

"...Shut up and disappear!"

"Oh?"

Himura approached Kirika up the stairs instead. Propping his hand against the wall, he lustfully swept his gaze towards Kirika's neck with an amused expression—

"I see now. So you think you won't have to listen to my orders as long as you endure this. Haha, all for the sake of that guy? How strong you are... But surely all for naught in the end."

"____!"

"Holding it in is not good for your body. If it's just a little bit, I could help you here right now, you know?"

"Shut up!"

Kirika shoved Himura away with a thud and forced her legs to dash desperately down the stairs. She could feel the man laughing and shrugging wryly behind her but of course she did not look back.

Biting her lower lip hard, Kirika continued to run.

Truly unacceptable. Unforgivable.

Surely all for naught—But somewhere in the back of her mind, she agreed with what he had said.

Part 5

The first task was to converge with Kuroe at the "Dan-no-ura." After all, Alice was likely to make another visit and it was necessary to inform Kuroe of the latest news. Supposing the promotion was ineffective and business was slow at the shop, they could even ask Kuroe to join in the search—These were Haruaki and his group's original plans.

In the end, they did not meet Kuroe, and the reason was—

"Hey~ lady, how are you doing?"

"Wanna have some fun together with us? We're quite free right now. I know a very nice place!"

"Ara ara, how troubling... Should I title this scene 'The Central District of Lust'?"

Before Haruaki and company could reach Kuroe, they easily discovered Alice.

The location was a cafe terrace on the way from school to the shopping street. Alice was being surrounded by a few young men. Although she was in casual clothing, the massive musical instrument case could be found beside her this time.

"Hey, isn't she acting too defenseless, drinking tea at a place like this..."

"W-What should we do?"

While they discussed, Alice had already spotted them. Ara ara—she first stared with her eyes wide open followed by a smile. Then she spoke to the men around her:

"My apologies but something urgent has come up. Please excuse me."

"No way? Hey, hey, let's go and do something fun, okay?"

"This is troubling... I know, how about this, let me give you each a present that will allow you to have fun, okay?"

"A present? No, we don't want that, you're much better... Eh?"

Alice casually took out from her shoulder bag something that could indeed be considered a present. Neither a doll, a cake, nor a bouquet of flowers, it was something much more versatile that anyone would readily accept—

Plain old cash.

Smiling generously, she grabbed a stack of ten thousand yen bills and shoved them to the men. At a glance, each person held at least ten bills in their hands.

"Woah!"

"Hey hey, is this really okay? We never said we wanted money, eh?"

"Eh? What I feel like... You seem to have more? Let me count them!"

Alice picked up the musical instrument case and successfully freed herself from the men. But instead of approaching Haruaki's group, she stopped and stood at speaking distance.

"I have a question. Could you answer truthfully?"

Fear spoke up and glared at Alice.

"Are you the one who is making things in 'my shape.'"

"I've already told you. The culprit is me."

She replied instantly without any hesitation. Haruaki and his companions were not even given time to think.

Smiling like a saint, Alice became a true "enemy" starting from this moment.

Haruaki clenched his fist tightly. Fear and Konoha simultaneously released a bone-chilling aura of rage. Rather, one might better call it murderous intent.

Yet Alice responded to all this with a smile.

"Ara ara, how terrifying."

"Stop screwing around! Why? The only one you want is me, right? Stop involving unrelated people!"

Fear snarled angrily, looking as if she was about to charge ahead. Alice went "Hmm—" and inclined her head.

"This isn't the right timing for the answer... Besides, it would be difficult to explain at this point, wouldn't it? After all, it's merely one death so far."

"What! You're going to kill more—!"

"Stop it! If you want to take me away then come at me, no one else!"

"Perhaps I might resort to that eventually. What's required for that purpose has already been delivered... But there's no need for impatience currently, so I will go with the first plan for now. Let me first finish what needs to be done."

"In other words, killing other people first...!"

"Please think back more carefully. Indeed, 'thinking' is necessary suffering—That said, from the way you look, it must be quite a challenge for you people. Well then, I shall offer you a hint."

"A hint...?"

Indeed—Alice simply nodded her head.

"The first person died yesterday. Everyone who dies subsequently will share something in common. Once you figure it out, the problem should be solved."

"What are you talking about?"

"Fufu—Please do your best. Well then, I shall excuse myself for today."

Saying that, Alice turned around and ran.

"H-Hold it right there!"

The trio hastily gave chase but Alice instantly disappeared around a corner nearby. But of course they could not give up so easily. Surveying the surroundings from an intersection ahead—

"Found her! Over there!"

"Ara ara, feel free to pursue me, but do realize it will only end in wasted effort, okay?"

Alice had stopped and was crouching down on the road ahead. Adjusting her monocle with one hand, she also loaded the musical instrument case onto her back, the one she had been carrying in her hand.

"Wasted effort? How would I know if I don't try!?"

Fear led the way and chased after Alice who had started walking again. Leaving the shopping street, they entered the nearby residential area. Passing through the public housing estate, they gradually entered an increasingly desolate area near the mountains.

"Are you okay? Haruaki-kun!"

"I-I'm okay! Don't mind me, make sure you don't lose her!"

Haruaki tried his best to appease his lungs that were suffering from the sudden marathon and gave chase again. Alice gave a quick glance behind

and suddenly changed directions, starting to run up a challenging slope. Their surroundings were already giving off an air of the countryside, with lifeless red and green leaves occupying most of the view. With no signs of tall buildings anywhere, there were only scattered houses and farmland. Haruaki already knew that the northern part of Hitsutou City was quite deserted, but being confronted so directly, it was difficult to associate this sight with the train station as part of the same city.

"She's going to escape into the mountains if this continues! Cow Tits, do you sense any humans around?"

"Uh... I guess... There aren't any!"

"Then in that case! Mechanism No.8 crushing type, circular form:
«Breaking Wheel of Francia», Curse Calling!"

Using her entire body strength, Fear launched the torture wheel transformed from the Rubik's cube. Pulling the chain of cubes behind it, the torture wheel smashed through tree branches along the side of the road as it flew towards Alice's back—

Alice simply leaped to the side to evade the attack, using her remaining momentum to roll to an empty spot by the roadside. This seemed to be a long abandoned farmhouse, an ancient Japanese style home built beside barren farmland. The abandoned house was tilting precariously. Its decrepit earthen walls were covered by creeping vines artistically. Alice rushed into the house.

"Gotcha! We're not gonna let you escape!"

"Prepare yourself!"

Naturally, Fear and the rest followed in pursuit—Just as they were about to step into the wide open entrance—

"Please wait a minute. I would advise you all against entering this place, yes? It is very dangerous."

Standing on rotten tatami mats, the speaker herself was smiling alone in the center of the abandoned house where dust pervaded the air.

"Hmph, you totally suck if you think you can escape with such words. Just surrender without a fuss. We won't take your life."

"...I have already given fair warning, yes?"

Sighing, Alice opened the musical instrument case and pulled out the contrabass by its neck. Fear and Konoha leaped forward simultaneously, one of them wielding the torture wheel while the other readied her hand in a karate chop—

Using the contrabass like a racquet, Alice effortlessly swept away the flying torture wheel. Immediately with the sound of wood breaking, the musical instrument cracked open.

"What a strange tactile sensation... But that's way too fragile!"

"By the way, the game ends in two minutes."

"I don't understand what you're saying!"

Konoha chopped with her hand. Alice turned her body and swung the contrabass upwards at the same time. Konoha's knife hand easily sliced through the instrument where she made contact. Looking at the severed cross section of the instrument, Konoha frowned:

"...! This is—?"

"Cow Tits, stand back! Let's destroy that first!"

Fear retrieved the torture wheel with a tug on the chain of cubes. With a series of metallic noises sounding like a spell, the block of iron instantly took on a new and violent form.

"Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»—Curse Calling!"

The execution stake flew like an arrow. Faced with this attack, Alice swung the almost destroyed contrabass high above her shoulder—And simply smashed it against the ground.

The sound of breakage.

These were the death cries of an elegantly curved contrabass. At the same time—

"W-What...?"

"I don't recall if I've mentioned it before? This appearance of a contrabass is merely incidental. After all, carrying something like this openly on the streets could easily cause misunderstandings with the police."

The accompanying noise also heralded the birth of the massive murder weapon Alice was carrying.

This murder weapon had a long shaft and resembled a hybrid between a spear and a hammer. On the tip of the massive block of metal, slightly rusting and filthy, there was an acute and heavy blade, resembling a butcher's cleaver. Inside the dim interior of this abandoned house, the weapon looked rather like a twisted and slender cross. Covered with dust, a cross from a destroyed church.

"Tsk... I was going to ask why it was so fragile and it turns out to be camouflage."

"Irrelevant. In that case, I shall simply destroy the contents inside... Hmm!"

Konoha groaned as a result of the bright red color dripping from Alice's hand. Did she accidentally get scratched by fragments or something during the contrabass' destruction? Konoha narrowed her eyes and began to murmur: "Red paint... That's simply red paint..." But who knew how long she could endure.

"Ara ara, there seems to be too much naughtiness here... Anyway, there's only a minute left. This is hurting quite a bit and I'm growing tired of this."

"What are you talking about just now? Are you counting how long it will take until you're caught!?"

Lifting the strange weapon, Alice seemed to be pondering something while her hand bled, looking up at the cobweb-covered ceiling. Then she instantly recovered her usual smile, and for some reason, looked with her monocled left eye at Haruaki who was standing behind Fear. Haruaki sensed something strange from Alice's expression but the vague feeling was easily blown away by her next declaration.

"Let me say this, it is now time for this game to end. Although there's a minute left, stalling for time is proving quite a chore. My utmost apologies, please allow me to hereby end this game—You girls will be fine, right? But I wouldn't be so sure about him in the back."

Alice raised the hammer up high and swung clearly at nobody.

Instead, it was the main pillar supporting this crumbling abandoned house.

"Wha...! Fool, you don't care about what happens to you too... Damn it!"

"Haruaki-kun! Hurry and escape this place!"

Fear and Konoha forgot the enemy for this instant and turned to look at Haruaki who was the last person to enter the house. Haruaki frantically tried to leave but there was not enough time!

"Let's smash this over and over again!" Reenactment: «How to Process Mince-Meat»!"

Accompanied by a series of noises, the massive hammer pounded the main pillar of the damaged house. Instantly, it felt like something exploded. This full powered attack sounded as if dozens of people made booming noises simultaneously—the main pillar was smashed apart almost like it exploded. Immediately, Haruaki found himself surrounded by a rumbling from all directions, as ominous as thunder.

Three steps. That was all Haruaki managed to move.

The abandoned house's entrance seemed as if it were hundreds of meters away. Fear and Konoha sounded distant as if their voices were traveling through water. Cold sweat flowed down his back. Fragments of timber kept falling down from overhead. An especially poignant crunching noise followed. As Haruaki sought the exit, he looked back as if refusing to give up.

Within his field of view—

He saw Alice's figure vanish with a "whoosh!"—

Without allowing anyone to escape, the abandoned house collapsed completely.

Chapter 3 - The Sadist Who Is Nowhere / "A gasper on the bed, or her cute secret"

Part 1

Building materials crashed down on her body. Out of the way. Out of the way. Hurry and get out of my way!

"Gu... Gaaaaaaaah!"

Manifesting her "nature" all around her body, she straightened her knees and stood up all at once. Accompanied by a cloud of dust, the surrounding timber were all sliced apart and blown away. Involuntarily, her mutterings were mixed with violent intentions.

"What a hindrance! Mere lowly sawdust—how dare such arrogant debris require me to slice them personally...!"

A-A-Ah... That's not right. I... I... The one here is... me.

"...Haruaki-kun... Haruaki-kun!"

The situation was too bleak. A dark premonition... Were that truly the ending, Konoha would seek to destroy the world completely. Such terror reawakened her past self for an instant. Using all her effort to sweep this fear aside, Konoha surveyed her surroundings.

There was nothing.

Only a collapsed abandoned house. A mountain of rubble.

"Ahhh... Ahhhhhh..."

Her heart pounded uncontrollably. Wait, no, this can't be true. So please... Definitely!

Using her hand to slice apart the timber by her feet, Konoha desperately looked for signs of Haruaki. Here, he must be here, absolutely unmistakably. So please... Ahhh... Please!

Konoha found a slightly protruding spot. He—was standing there at the time.

"Haruaki-kun, Haruaki-kun! Are you okay? Hey, answer me please!"

Using her hands to dig into the rubble, she kept sweeping debris aside.

But she could not find him.

There were no signs of him anywhere.

What she found was... Beneath the pile of timber, the only discovery was—

"...Eh?"

Konoha exclaimed in surprise. Indeed, over there was—simply a strange—Ornamental bull, made of steel.

On further examination, there was a flash of silver under the bull's belly. Then as the chain of cubes connected to the bull was pulled, a silver-haired girl struggled to get up from the space between the bull and its pedestal. Then—

"...Oh, you two are fine? Thank goodness!"

A certain part of the bull opened up. Out emerged the youth whom Konoha had been searching for.

"I'm the one... Who should be saying thank goodness. I was so worried..."

Perhaps drained from the sudden relief, Konoha collapsed and sat down on the pile of rubble.

Haruaki scratched his cheek and said:

"R-Really? I'm sorry I made you worried. But... I'm also glad you're both okay. It goes both ways, I guess?"

We're both not human. How could something trivial like this threaten us? Idiot.

Konoha simply grumbled in her heart and turned her gaze away with displeasure.

Because if she were to continue gazing at his easygoing face... Watching him worry sincerely about tools—

She knew a certain something was going to flow down her cheeks.

"So, what is this? To be suddenly stuffed into this thing, I have no idea what... Is it a cow?"

"Mechanism No.24 roasting type, sculpture form: «Voices of the Brazen Bull». By itself, there's nothing dangerous right now, but once you imprison someone in it and burn firewood underneath, the iron will heat up and roast the person inside. Sealed inside, the screams sound like a bull's bellows. This form was created by referencing an invention dating back to Before Common Era..."

"Hey, Fear?"

Hmm? —Fear glanced up, looking a little out of it. She must have said all that stuff subconsciously? Her mind was already occupied with other thoughts. Indeed, it was obvious from her expression—definitely certain thoughts of a masochistic nature.

"...Anyway, thanks. I'm saved."

"No need... to thank me."

Fear replied, still in a daze, her gaze moving across the hill of rubble. She simply moved her lips and said:

"She escaped."

"Yeah. Say, did you two see what she did in the end?"

"I saw it. She simply vanished. Probably by using some sort of cursed tool's ability?"

"Such as teleportation...? Seriously, what kind of tool would be capable of doing that?"

Moreover, although it was just an abandoned house, one could not underestimate the power displayed by that hammer and butcher's cleaver in its destruction of the building with a single attack. The likelihood of it being a cursed tool was quite considerable.

"Clearly that woman could not be allowed to escape... She'll keep... again..."

Fear clenched her little fist tightly.

As if unable to forgive a certain person and unable to forgive herself as well.

As if gathering all her strength in that fist. In contrast, her gaze seemed weak and gloomy. Nothing but gloom. Haruaki felt that her gaze resembled the one he had once witnessed on a rainy rooftop some time ago.

"By the way... Isn't this cow's expression kind of stupid looking? It really calls into question the creator's aesthetic sense."

Haruaki patted the bull sculpture and grumbled.

Sh-Shut up, moron—! I'm the one who made it, so are you saying my face looks stupid!? I'll curse you!

Haruaki was hoping for this sort of response, but he never heard it no matter how long he waited.

Part 2

—Switching off the majority of the lights inside, the shop was now her personal domain.

Ningyouhara Kuroe stared at that thingBecause it was necessary, she had no choice but to do this.

So she reached out with her hand.

Her fingertips felt a sensation they were long accustomed to. Relief—But at the same time, her heart could not help but stir.

Ahhh... In spite of that—There was a need to do this. Hence she focused her gaze on that thingWhat was that thing?

Naturally, Ningyouhara Kuroe already knew the answer.

Several grams in mass. A soft substance. A polymer made of amino acids. Trash. Treasure. One's own appearance. A woman's symbol. A crime of the past. A symbol of life. A god among humans. A vague record of time. A single filament for sorcery. A tool for business. A current necessity. A secret they do not know. And also—

—Nourishment.

Part 3

Haruaki, Konoha and Fear continued to search the ruins of the abandoned house for the vanished Alice until late at night, but of course, it was in vain. The next day at dawn—

The news on television reported the discovery of another cube-shaped corpse.

Ahhh—I must do something.

Fear's mind was filled with endless anxiety. By the time she came to her senses, lessons had all ended.

Staring blankly at the ceiling of the noisy classroom, Fear pondered.

Indeed, she felt compelled to act. It was her duty. After all, Alice was doing these things because she wanted to recruit Fear into the Bivorio Family. If Cow Tits was right, the chances of it being terrorism was quite high. If you don't join us, innocent people will be killed one after another! Can you accept that?—That was the message behind it.

—How could I possibly accept this!? That woman is crazy!

But why? Why does that woman want me? What kind of responsibilities will she impose on me in the Family? For the sake of fulfilling her goal, she even needs to go as far as to kill off innocent people?

Furthermore, that woman mentioned something about "figuring out what the victims share in common"... What did that mean? Would the incident really end once they found this point of commonality? Their only source was the news on television, but the news reports did not point out anything in common between the victims. There was very little information at the moment, with only rehashed speculation of a psychopathic murderer or a religious cult's ritual. Naturally, Haruaki and his companions who watched the news together were unable to find any commonality in the victims' information such as their names or occupations.

(Ahhh... I must do something, but there's so little information!)

Was she unsuited to thinking? Fear wondered helplessly. After all, she was a tool and tools did not need to think.

Humans were suited to thinking. Because they lacked power, because they were not tools, they needed to think.

In times like these, she needed that person after all.

There was nothing wrong with asking others for help. Fear had learnt this in the previous incident.

"Fear... Hey, Fear?"

"That's... Right... I guess I'll have to get help again... Things weren't working out in the first place."

Treating Haruaki's calls to her purely as processed information, Fear took her schoolbag and stood up.

"...Hmm? What's the matter, Fear-kun?"

"Kirika... I have a request, could you please help me?"

Kirika's return gaze seemed to carry a certain kind of ambiguity. As if enduring something, she meaninglessly narrowed and widened her eyes every now and then. The rhythm of her breathing was also quite irregular, often mixed with intentional deep breaths.

As she took a deep breath, Kirika slumped her shoulders and turned her gaze away.

"—My apologies. I've already mentioned yesterday, I can't provide any assistance this time."

"I see..."

Fear had expected Kirika's answer, but it still elicited a sense of loneliness. She could not help but feel gloomy, bowing her head dejectedly.

"Hey Fear, I understand how you feel, but please don't make unreasonable requests to her... I'm sorry, Class Rep, don't let it weigh on your mind."

"No... I'm the one who should..."

"Also, umm... It pains me to say this, but we need to go out today as well..."

As soon as Haruaki finished his sentence, Kirika looked up, glancing at him with a gaze conveying a complicated mix of emotions, but then she immediately looked back down again.

"Didn't we agree... it was... just for yesterday...? Fear and Konoha aside, you're the executive committee's assistant, Yachi, to ask for leave two days in a row... Too irresponsible... It troubles... me greatly too."

We're the ones who feel greatly troubled. After all, Haruaki is an important part of the team. Compared to a sports festival, our current matter is much more urgent—But then again, Kirika would only speak this way because she was not privy to the situation.

"Meaning you won't allow it?"

"Indeed, your request for leave... Denied. No time to... waste. Let's... go... Ooh!"

Kirika was just about to rise when she lost balance. Haruaki frantically reached out to catch her, but she grabbed the corner of her desk to support herself on her own.

"Huff... Huff..."

"A-Are you okay?"

"...I am fine. Let's go. Put on your sportswear."

"What do you mean by 'let's go'? You don't look fine at all..."

Haruaki frowned, greatly troubled. Judging from his eyes, his intentions were completely obvious. Indeed. Naturally, he could not possibly leave Kirika alone in her unwell state. He wanted to help.

—Then why don't you just go ahead and help her!?

Suddenly, an annoyed feeling of resignation filled Fear's heart, one that even she could not understand very well herself. This emotion turned into a forceful and legitimate reason, easily trumping all others.

"Haruaki, you go and help Kirika. I'll be fine by myself."

"H-Hey! Wait a minute!"

While listening to Haruaki's calls—

Fear rushed out of the classroom without looking back at all.

By the time Haruaki hurried out of the classroom, there were no more signs of Fear and chasing after her would be too difficult. Left with no recourse, he could only entrust the search to Konoha. As much as he wanted to search personally, there was no way he could leave Kirika unattended.

Although he had offered many times to send her to the infirmary, Kirika always rejected with a simple "I am fine." In the end, Haruaki and Kirika went over to the usual arch building site together. In that case, there was no choice but to hurry and get the work done. Hence they began hammering nails, but—

Kirika's breathing remained irregular and her face looked quite red. Rather than a flu, she seemed to be suffering from heat stroke, looking as though she would collapse in the middle of each motion. Simply watching was nerve wracking.

"Class Rep."

"Hmm... Huff... I said I'm fine... Okay, hurry and get to work."

One more time—Haruaki secretly made up a rule on his own. If he were to conclude "this can't continue" one more time, he was going to drag her to the infirmary, even by force if necessary.

Who knew if Kirika had read Haruaki's mind, but she stared at the top of a nail and said:

"...Sorry."

"Eh, what?"

"You... and Fear... have something... important to do, right?"

"Yeah... That's right but even if I'm there, I might not be of too much use. Besides, I can't leave you alone like this."

"No... I know. Compared to me or the sports festival, what you're facing is more important. It's fine if you go. Rather, you really should go..."

Panting, Kirika continued in a dazed tone of voice:

"...Yesterday I heard... a rumor... that the sports festival might be cancelled."

"Eh?"

"Because of the current homicide cases. Apparently there's an influential member of the parents association who lives near one of the locations where a victim was discovered. An excessive overreaction... Basically, the argument is: if there is a psychopathic serial killer on the loose in the city, picking random targets aimlessly, how could a sports festival be held where any number of people could attend?"

Picking random targets aimlessly. Indeed, they still had no idea what Alice meant by what the victims had in common. How did she choose her victims? Did they really have something in common? What did she intend by having them figure out what was in common? Haruaki had spent the day contemplating this unanswerable question as he sat beside the listless Fear.

"...Absolutely ridiculous. If that really were a concern, couldn't they simply place the city under martial law first? Nevertheless, calls for security in education circles seem to have grown popular in recent times, beyond a necessary level. Although there are only these sorts of arguments at the current stage, if homicide cases continue to happen, it's going to get much more real."

"R-Really?"

No matter what, Haruaki never expected the incident to be making waves in this area as well. He had no idea at all. Feeling that it would be unfair to reveal to Kirika that they were currently pursuing the culprit, Haruaki's face was filled with mixed emotions. However—

"Then is it related to your situation?"

"Uh..."

"If you are acting to prevent it, I should let you go instead. I don't want the sports festival to be cancelled either. But—Oh no, what is this...? I'm putting the cart before the horse."

"Putting the cart before the horse?"

"...No, how should I describe this? Does this count as reversed priorities? I don't want the sports festival to be cancelled because I enjoy it. I enjoy working with you like this, which is why I don't want to lose this opportunity, neither do I wish to waste it; however, if I let you leave, this opportunity would be lost... The result seems to be the same regardless of my choice, yet different...? I really don't get it... Absolutely ridiculous..."

Kirika's murmurings to herself had gone from meaninglessness to approach ravings of madness. Simply moving her lips, she was swinging the hammer with mechanical movements.

"Even I don't understand what I'm doing... Or what I want to do. To this date, I simply act according to need, with acts truly performed by my own freewill one could easily count them... Hence... I am like a tool, a gear being used. A gear that always happens to be present, to be inserted by someone... Not only a class representative, but also a researcher... Owww!"

"CI-Class Rep!"

Kirika's accident was only natural given her current state. Having smashed the hammer on her own finger, her fingernail had split open, spilling blood. Haruaki hastily surveyed the surroundings but fortunately, no one seemed to be taking notice.

This can't continue. "One more time" had finally arrived. Haruaki felt compelled to take Kirika to the infirmary no matter what. Although her finger injury would heal in an instant, Kirika was definitely not in her normal state.

Just as Haruaki grabbed Kirika's hand, intending to drag her to the infirmary by force—

She smiled helplessly as she watched her bleeding fingertip—the way it was healing gradually, and said:

"Oh... How truly disgusting I am."

Murmuring exceptionally blankly, she then lost consciousness.

I will take her there, it'll definitely be okay! I will go alone, so you guys don't need to come along! —Haruaki vigorously pushed away the surrounding students and—

"Ganon-san, Ganon-san!"

"Oh~ I remember you are... The one whom the superintendent favors greatly... Yagi-kun?"

"It's Yachi, okay!?"

"Oh, is that it? Simply recalling the name takes so much effort... Would you like some Pocky?"

The master of the infirmary was lazy and drowsy as usual, which was quite irritating.

"No thanks! Don't you see what I'm carrying on my back?"

"Hmm~? How troubling, if you want to borrow the infirmary's bed for a lover's date, cleaning up afterwards might be... Anyway, looks like it's not the right time for kidding around. There are no other patients at the moment, so just lay her down on a bed first."

Haruaki gently let Kirika down from his back onto a bed.

"So, what's the matter with her? A heatstroke?"

"Umm... I have no idea. She seemed quite unwell since this morning..."

"Hmm... Then various checkups need to be done first..."

"Oh by the way! Umm—Due to various reasons, please don't take off too much of her clothes!"

Since Ganon was Zenon's older sister, it was possible that she knew about cursed tools. However... Since Kirika had not divulged her true identity to the superintendent, Haruaki decided to keep her cursed bondage suit a secret as much as possible.

"I can't perform any diagnosis without taking clothes off... Ah~ You're that type, right? 'My girlfriend's naked body belongs to my eyes only~' is what you're trying to say, right?"

"N-No, of course not! Argggh! You're driving me nuts!"

At this moment, Kirika's eyes happened to open.

"Y-Yachi."

"Class Rep! Are you okay? Anyway, this is the infirmary so it's fine for you to sleep here!"

Shaking her head lightly, Kirika stared straight into Haruaki's eyes and spoke as if pleading something—

"I want... to go home. I'll be fine... once I go home..."

"...You mean 'it can't be cured unless you go home'?"

Kirika nodded. Haruaki understood. Whatever Kirika was suffering from, it was probably not an illness but a condition born from "some supernatural cause."

"I-I'll get our schoolbags and come back immediately. Ganon-san, please just watch her."

"Mmmhmm—Is there some difficulty that cannot be shared?"

Ganon lazily returned to her seat, asking with a stick of Pocky in her mouth.

"Yes, sorry about that."

Haruaki first returned to the classroom to retrieve his schoolbag and swiftly changed back to his uniform. At that point, he was caught in a dilemma as he recalled Kirika's schoolbag should be in the girl's changing rooms. Fortunately, he met a girl from his class outside the changing rooms who knew about Kirika fainting and she helped retrieve Kirika's bag and uniform.

Returning to the infirmary, Haruaki found Kirika with her eyes closed again. Ganon meaninglessly adjusted her glasses with one hand while her other hand was occupied with a jigsaw puzzle, equally meaninglessly.

"Hey, boy with the secret difficulties, here's a Christmas present delivered right into your hands."

"Eh? Uh... An address written on a note, and ten thousand yen...?"

"After last time, I am leaking personal information again using the health survey forms. Before this child went to sleep, she mentioned that you probably don't know her address, but she nodded off before I could ask her. And then the money is the taxi fare... Man, explaining takes so much effort."

"Taxi fare...?"

"Just pay me back afterwards. Sigh~ Because the superintendent mentioned before, asking me to help Yachi as much as possible. So just now, if you actually said you were having a lover's date, I would have handed the key to you without a fuss and left."

Haruaki hesitated for a moment, but it was true that he did not have much cash on hand. Without knowing the cost for a ride to Kirika's home, he had no choice but to accept the money first.

"Sorry, then I humbly accept your loan."

"That's right, that's right, just accept it without a fuss. You need to let the adults act cool once in a while... By the way, I already called for a taxi just now, so it should be here soon."

Haruaki originally had her pegged as a lazy and delinquent school physician, never expecting her to take action when the situation called for it. Revising his assessment of Ganon, Haruaki bowed his head deeply.

Carrying Kirika on his back with two schoolbags in his arms, Haruaki left the infirmary. The taxi waiting before the school gates took him to a brand new apartment building near downtown. A quick glance determined its height to be over ten floors. The neat and tidy entrance was quite spacious. Clearly, the rent here was definitely not cheap.

"Okay, let's go... Oh no, it's an automatic lock? What should I do now..."

"Did you help me get my uniform...?"

"Oh, you're awake? I did get it for you, it's stuffed inside the bag."

"The purse in the skirt pocket, there's a keycard in it... Nnngg!"

Kirika swallowed painfully. Was she finding it hard to even speak? Then she immediately closed her eyes and all Haruaki could hear was the sound of her irregular breathing.

Opening the schoolbag according to her instructions, he took out the purse from the skirt pocket—It felt positively criminal to be furtively searching a girl's skirt, but Haruaki decided to ignore this feeling for this moment.

Using the key to enter the lobby, Haruaki entered the elevator. There was a room number in the address Ganon had written for him. As soon as the elevator started moving against gravity, the shaking caused Kirika to wake up again.

"Sorry for all this..."

"You should just sleep, it's okay. Seriously, I should have used forceful measures earlier... Perhaps you have been hiding it all this time, but

there's no need to push yourself so much until you collapse, right? So that's why you couldn't help us."

"...That's not it."

Ding—The elevator arrived at the destination floor. Walking along the quiet hallway, Haruaki asked in return:

"What is not what?"

"I couldn't help... not because I'm unwell... Neither is it because I don't want to..."

"So what's the matter?"

Haruaki felt her arm on his neck tighten but she did not reply. Was she worrying over if she should say it or what she should do—or perhaps her words just now came out as a result of delirium?

Arriving at the door, he put down Kirika. She seemed to be contemplating something as she stood there unlocking the door. But finally—without looking back at Haruaki behind her, she simply opened the door wide enough for a single person to slip through.

"...Thank you, Yachi. I'll be fine after some sleep, so you can—"

"Yes yes, excuse me for the intrusion~"

"Wha... Y-Yachi!"

Haruaki forced his way into the flat, pushing Kirika from behind. He felt more and more like a criminal.

His back facing the closed door, Haruaki gazed back into Kirika's eyes that were staring at him.

"Reason number one, our conversation just now is not finished. I believe you are hiding something as well, Class Rep. Reason number two, just now you said you'll be fine once you return home, but is that really true? I can't leave until I confirm this fact. And then how should I put this... It's only my intuition, but—reason number three, I keep getting the feeling that the two reasons are related."

"...!"

"If there is any reason causing you to collapse on the ground and faint like earlier, tell me. Class Rep, you've helped us many times, so please, allow me to help you for once... Like a friend is what I'm thinking. Although I don't have any power, at the very least, I can listen."

Kirika's gaze wavered and she bowed her head as if trying to hide her expression. Her shoulders immediately began to quiver lightly.

"Fuhaha... You leave me speechless."

"That's right~ I am sometimes stubborn to a shocking degree. Have you given up resisting?"

"Yes... I give up. Hmm... Fufu, it feels happy actually. Friends huh... Not only 'someone belonging to the Lab Chief's Nation' and 'Year 1 Class 2's class representative,' but also 'Yachi Haruaki's friend'... Not bad. I like it. But exactly because of that—Indeed, I cannot hide this any longer. Nnng, guh!"

Still gazing downwards, Kirika took half a step forward as if deliberating over something. Her voice was mixed with painful moans while she breathed heavily as if she had just completed a marathon.

"I was threatened by someone, if I were to help you guys, then what I've been hiding—that activity would be revealed to you."

"Th-Threatened?"

"That's right. Something I absolutely did not want you to know. Something very... very very—awkward and embarrassing, disgusting, an activity I engage in. I don't want you to dislike or feel disgusted of me. But... For you to treat me as a friend, even though I am a gear wheel belonging nowhere... Hiding things from you would be a breach of trust, so I must make my confession. If I will be disliked, so be it. I cannot bear it any longer—Because I tried to bear it, I ended up like this."

"W-Wait a minute, my comprehension speed can't keep up, uh..."

"No more waiting. I can't wait any longer. Only because I was feeling defiant about being blackmailed using that hated activity, I endured purely through rebellious impulse—Haha, looks like it didn't work after all. Oh yeah, rather than explaining, it'd be faster for you to watch. Ooh... S-So... So... Yachi?"

She took another half step forward. Due to the narrowness of the entryway, Kirika naturally leaned herself against Haruaki's body. Her tongue seemed a little hindered but she swiftly called out Haruaki's name and looked up.

Then she whispered in his ear:

"Watch... As I do unspeakable things."

Part 5

Can't find her. Ahhh, I can't find Alice anywhere. But it was so easy to find her yesterday.

While Fear was wandering everywhere, the sky had darkened without her noticing. But in spite of impending night, she could not allow herself to stop without making any progress in the search. Casually inhaling the night air which had just switched from dusk, Fear continued walking along the streets.

Before the victims increased again, she had to find Alice.

Hence, she continued to walk. Sometimes she ran.

But neither the smile, the musical instrument case, nor the monocle appeared in her view. As if mocking how alone she was, the world remained beyond her solitary grasp.

Yes, solitary, alone. Fear suddenly thought of this fact—Why did she rush out of the classroom back then? Clearly the more manpower the better.

Perhaps because of the passage of time, Fear felt that her mind was turning slightly faster than a few hours earlier. The depressed impulse driving her at the time, somehow felt similar to what she had felt a few days ago when seeing Kuroe surrounded by the crowd.

Ah, in other words, it was—The admiration and jealousy a tool felt towards humans.

Indeed. Back then, she could not help but wonder, which side was Haruaki naturally supposed to help? Which side should he help? Was it Kirika, who was human like Haruaki, or was it the weird little girl whom goodness knows was human or a tool?

Of course, she had no idea which side Haruaki would choose. Precisely because she did not want to know, she fled.

Fear sighed in self mockery.

(That guy doesn't make his choices from such a perspective, but despite being well aware of that, I...)

But unwilling to dwell any further on the ways Kirika and her were different, Fear was unable to control her emotions back then.

In the end, she lacked confidence. "What" was "her current self"? She could not state confidently. Neither a complete human nor a tool, "her current self" was simply a half-baked existence...

By the time she noticed, Fear found herself at a park. Shaking her head as if to dispel the gloomy mood, Fear successively checked the people sitting on the benches.

—Even as a half-baked existence, she understood one thing. She was here for the sake of lifting her curse and becoming more human. She had already witnessed an actual case she regarded as her goal. Hence, Fear absolutely could not accept Alice's hindering ways, especially in harming others—

"Damn it... Not here either?"

Looking up at the clock tower in the park, Fear found the time approaching eight in the evening.

Haruaki had probably finished helping Kirika by now, right? As for Cow Tits, whatever. Perhaps those two were searching the streets like her. Either that or at home. However... Fear somehow did not feel like seeing those two. She did not want to return home yet.

"Eight o' clock... That's the time for Kuroe to close up shop..."

Fear decided to go ask her if she had seen Alice. Although Alice had switched targets to Fear, in light of her visit to the beauty parlor for a haircut, Fear concluded it would not be strange if Alice had gone to harass Kuroe again.

Despite getting a little lost along the way, Fear finally made her way to the shopping street she remembered. It was a deserted scene. The "Dan-no-ura" was already closed, with the metal shutters down completely except over the glass door entrance.

Were Haruaki and Konoha inside, it'd feel so embarrassing—Thinking that, Fear discreetly peeped into the shop from the entrance. With only half the lights on inside, Kuroe was crouching in the back of the shop. Was she cleaning up? Just as she wondered, Fear saw it.

Kuroe was holding a small paper bag in her hand. It looked like the kind of gift bag one would use for presents or souvenirs Reaching into the paper bag, what Kuroe then took out was—

Hair.

(Wha...)

Fear had some impression she had seen it before. Where? That rainbow-colored, ostentatious hair.

Kuroe stared unerringly at the hair in her palm. Her expressionless face was even more devoid of expression than usual. Then she gently curled her fingers as if beginning to caress, wrapping her hand around the hair in her palm. Then—

While giving off faint light, the hair vanished from Kuroe's palm.

Furthermore, Fear noticed minute movements in Kuroe's lips. By her guess, Kuroe was murmuring...

Ahhh—how delicious.

"...!"

Fear felt goosebumps on her back. Struck with the onslaught of boundless terror, Fear could not help but turn tail and run. Rushing out of the shopping street, she finally stopped when she reached the crowded business district. Supporting herself with her hand against a utility pole covered with ads of half-naked women, Fear panted heavily, her shoulders heaving up and down.



"Huff... Huff... What I saw just now... What was that...?"

Incomprehensible. How strange. What was that? She ate it? Absorbed it? Human hair?

Fear was struck with a splitting headache. What she recalled was—Kuroe's words. Her curse.

She had been cursed for cutting hair off to drain human life force—Wasn't that what she had said?

Then—Could it be that—What Fear had just witnessed—In other words... What it implied—the success case—was there any evidence to prove that it was actually possible—

Fear's mind was in chaos. Head dizzy and vision blurry, it felt as if the world had turned upside down. The warmth of the hand scrubbing her back, the sensation of the fingers combing her hair, the smile when pouring juice for her, all these memories slowly and gradually faded in color.

Just at this moment, a voice entered Fear's ears.

"...Next on the news, another cube-shaped corpse was found today. The discovered victim is Osanai Yuuko-san from Honryuu City. The police are—"

The sound was coming from a massive television displayed at the entrance of a nearby electronics retail store.

Fear's eyes were glued to the screen.

The image of the victim's face onscreen—Fear had some impression.

Unmistakably, she was the owner of the rainbow-colored hair.

Part 6

Haruaki found himself dragged forcibly to the bedroom. With no lights on and the curtains shut tightly, the room was completely dark. The only shapes he could barely make out were the bed and something resembling a desk.

"W-Wait a minute, Class Rep..."

His arm suddenly released, Haruaki fell down flat on his bottom in the center of the room. Breathing irregularly, Kirika crawled unsteadily onto the bed. Unsure of the situation, Haruaki could not move at all. Gazing seductively at his face, Kirika reached towards her tracksuit pants and pulled them off without any hesitation. Beneath her pants were summer shorts, but these were also taken off as if she could not bear them any longer. Only now—did the black leather serving as Kirika's underwear finally appear.

"Ahhh..."

Kirika then reached towards the tracksuit top covering her upper body, pulled down the zipper and took off the jacket. Then she took off the gym uniform. Also removing the t-shirt beneath, in a manner akin to ripping it off—

Kirika slowly extended her arm, throwing the t-shirt towards the bedside. Of all the removed upper garments, the t-shirt descended fluttering as the last piece. Kneeling on the bed, Kirika's appearance was now the same as the moment in the past when Haruaki had discovered her hidden side. Clad in nothing but the bondage suit which would kill her as soon as she removed it. Highly revealing to an erotic degree, the skimpy leather gave off a dull black sheen.

"Cl-Class Rep..."

"Y-Yachi... Watch. Ahhh, please watch. Perhaps you might not want to watch, probably... Yes... Huff—Damn it... But already... It's no good... Nnnggg!"

Her mouth half-open—

Kirika leaned forward, her back straight, as if exhibiting her body before Haruaki's eyes.

Then her right arm—

Slowly, it moved slowly—

"...Tragic... River..."

It stopped. Her hand did not reach anywhere.

Suspended in midair, it seemed like some sort of dance.

At this moment, Kirika repeated her murmurs loudly:

"Tragic—«Tragic Black River»—!"

Instantly, the leather belt wrapped around her arm danced with delight. The extending leather gave off supernatural slithering noises as it moved like a snake or a gymnast's ribbon, tracing out spirals as it danced.

The snake slithered up the tree. Up the tree named Ueno Kirika. Along her arm, passing beneath her underarm, entangling all her arms and legs. Obsessively and compulsively, it wrapped itself around her layer upon layer to an astounding degree.

"...A-Ah... Huff..."

Maintaining her kneeling posture, Kirika was thus tied up by the leather belt. This was the sadistic fetish named capture. As the belt slithered, the constricting force gradually grew stronger with the leather sinking more conspicuously into the body.

As Haruaki watched in wide-eyed shock, Kirika's body was completely bound. The front end of the «Tragic Black River» began to sway. The state of bondage persisted while the belt's front end moved softly.

Next the belt entwined itself around Kirika's immobilized left hand. Even more slowly, the snake's tongue climbed over her thumb, slithering with the noise of leather. Then—

All at once, the thumb was bent in an unnatural direction.

"Gah! Kua... Ah... Ahhh... Nnnggg... Nnnnnnggggg!"

Snap! A noise sounding as light as a joke. Kirika's voice drowned it out completely.

"Cl-Class Rep...!"

"D-Don't interfere, it's not over... So just watch, Yachi, just watch... it... Ahhhhh!"

Index finger, followed by the middle finger. Naturally, then it was the ring finger, and even the little finger was not exempt.

Snap snap snap snap.

"Nngg, ooh... uwah..."

Kirika's bound body was twitching and recoiling from the pain. Her sweat either splashed about or flowed along her skin. Her ponytail, tied behind her head, also came undone during her convulsions, scattering all over the bedsheets like some kind of creature.

"Yes, leave it alone, this is... fine... But... it's... not... Not over yet... Guah!"

After breaking all her fingers, the «Tragic Black River» lifted its head and reached for Kirika's body. Passing over her arms and elbows, it reached her shoulders. Then it proceeded to entangle her knees and ankles. Finally, the belt wrapped itself around her neck like some sort of step that must not be forgotten—What was it going to do? The answer was obvious.

Haruaki tried to get up in a panic but his knees were powerless. With moist eyes, Kirika motioned from the bed for him to stop.

"It's okay, I won't die, I can't die, so... Just watch—"

He saw the broken fingers recover. But how could it really be okay? Right now, her body was being "contorted" even more severely than just now—!!

"Ahhh... Ahhh... Ahhh... «Tragic»... «Tragic»... «Tragic Black River»!
Come...!"

The belt restraining her squirmed even more intensely—

"Nngg... Ah... Ah... Ahhhh... Phew... Cough... kkkkkk—Ah?"

A momentary pause. The silence felt as if time itself had stopped.

Phew—Taking a deep breath, Kirika stared wide-eyed and stopped moving.

Her entire body made only a slight shudder.

Liberation.

"—Ah-haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Creak creak creak—Kirika's arms and legs were twisted by force. Her bones lost their purpose as bones.

The belt throttling her neck tightened, pressing on her windpipe.

Then with drool dangling from her mouth and a splattering of sweat, Kirika—

Collapsed on the bed, her entire body in spasms.

"Mmm..."

"Oh, you woke up?"

Kirika felt the usual stiffness of leather around her body. Her back was resting against the soft mattress she was well accustomed to. Overhead was the usual inorganic ceiling. This was her own room as usual. However... Why was his face by her side?

Dazed for several seconds, until the blood was finally delivered to her head—Only then did she suddenly recall.

"...!"

"Uwaah?"

Grabbing the blanket, she covered her head. As a result, her body became exposed, but whatever. It felt too embarrassing, truly embarrassing indeed. Her face must be completely red? No, it was probably pallid. He saw it. He found out about it. How she wished to be dead.

Her face covered beneath the blanket, Kirika gnashed her teeth in depression. He was not saying anything, so she had no choice but to speak up.

"...You understand now?"

"Yeah—Basically. Right, I should have realized earlier... That «Tragic Black River» is cursed. Since that's the case, it obviously carries a curse."

His voice sounded very calm. What was he thinking? Kirika was too scared to imagine.

"Indeed... The «Tragic Black River» carries a curse. Judging from its origins, a very typical form of curse. A curse that compels one to strangle, to hang, to torment and to kill someone, in the manner of a serial killer."

"..."

"Compared to picking a random person off the streets, there is a much better target for letting the curse blow off steam, namely, me. No matter how my bones are broken, how my joints are dislocated, how my neck is strangled, I won't die. So several times a month, I... Sometimes several

times a week, or even daily if necessary—I've been doing this. Haha, isn't this a truly ugly game played in solitude? Ahhh, now I feel so relieved. Now that you've seen it, I finally feel relieved. With this, I have nothing more to hide, and nothing anyone can use to blackmail me again..."

Indeed, blackmail was no longer meaningful to her. However—What she tried to protect even at the cost of submitting to blackmail, perhaps she might have destroyed it completely herself.

"Fufu, Yachi, how is it? What are your thoughts?"

"I... Umm, Class Rep..."

Will he say I am disgusting? That he never expected me to be someone like this? Or perhaps he'd say it's nothing and simply try to gloss over the matter? But henceforth, he probably wants to keep his distance from me, right? One could hardly blame him. Even I would find this type of girl disgusting. Abusing one's body because it will recover no matter what—This is not human at all but just a tool. This is what a self-fulfilling tool does. Indeed, a meaningless gear.

However, what he said next was—

"Class Rep... You are really gentle."

"Huh?"

Completely unexpected words. Kirika thought she must have heard wrong, but he—

"Because you don't want to hurt others, you are making yourself suffer—Creating memories you do not wish to recall, right? Given someone else, they might not necessarily do the same even if they also had healing abilities. Of course, were I in your place, I'm not sure if I'd do the same either. Hurting others is much simpler, so I think you are very gentle."

The voice came from the other end of the bed. Awkwardly averting his gaze, scratching his cheek, but carefully giving thought to each word he said, to compose this sincere speech... Kirika felt as though she could see him acting in such a manner.

"It's not disgusting at all. Besides, it's not your fault, Class Rep. Despite how I may look, because of living in that home, I have seen quite a lot, even though curses do not affect me—So I know. No matter how repulsive,

how embarrassing, how against your will, curses confer impulses that cannot be resisted... That is what 'cursed tools' are."

Hmm—It felt like Haruaki was nodding.

"As a result, I won't hate you, Class Rep, for something like this!"

"Ah—"

She had forgotten. She had forgotten a very important thing.

This boy was—

Unimaginably laid back with an outlook like a withered old man, and also—

"Fu... Kuhaha..."

No good, something was overflowing from inside. Kirika burst out laughing. Laughing as though she was mocking someone derisively!

"Seriously... Yes, absolutely ridiculous. Over thinking things, I'm the one who's absolutely ridiculous."

"Yeah, I agree that you really were too stupid just now. But then again, I can't laugh at you like this in the context of exams. Well then, regarding cursed tools, I have a request for you."

"Request?"

The instant he posed his question—

The blanket covering Kirika was unexpectedly pulled away. Supporting himself with his hand against the bed, Haruaki hunched over as if to peering into her face. His expression was laid back as usual. Due to their close separation, her heart felt as though it had stopped. Using this opportunity—

"Well... Class Rep... That «Tragic Black River», may I have it?"

"...?"

The nonchalance in his expression was as if he were asking "Would you like to exchange food from our lunchboxes?" But Kirika could currently feel his intentions.

Curses did not affect Yachi Haruaki.

Consequently, so long as the «Tragic Black River» was in his possession, no one would ever suffer from its curse again; moreover, the one currently suffering from its curse would be liberated—

Indeed, it was quite an attractive proposal. However—

"...I refuse. Even if you were to use your cooking secrets in exchange."

"Eh? But—"

"I am already used to controlling this thing. You won't be able to do much if you were the one holding it, right? Besides—"

She relaxed her face. This guy couldn't have forgotten what he had just said, right?

"This is my power, something I need in order to help you. Were I to let go of it, I would become a useless immortal... I don't want that. Aren't I 'Yachi Haruaki's friend'?"

"..."

"Please, allow me to be a friend capable of helping you."

Dozens of seconds passed. Sighing, Haruaki shifted his body and sat on the bed side, throwing a sideways glance at Kirika.

"Is it really okay?"

"I said it's okay."

"I see... Then I understand. I won't force you either. But... Should you ever feel tired of it, tell me immediately. I will take it off your hands any time."

"Yes."

"Also... About that curse... Targeting others would be more effective, right?"

"Why do you ask?"

Haruaki scratched his head.

"Well, although breaking bones would be a bit much, if it's only strangulation or constriction, I guess I could also... No, but getting choked by the neck would be really scary. Ahhh~ But then it'd be pointless? Hmmmm..."

Seriously, how stupid could this guy get? It was really dumbfounding.

"I don't think it makes a difference. Basically, doing it to myself is enough. Venting the impulses sufficiently, like today... Then... The condition doesn't deteriorate too badly..."

Saying that, Kirika began to recall. What exactly had she done in front of this guy?

She could not help but turn her face away in embarrassment. Speaking of which, she was currently completely nude... Well, stated more delicately, she was lying on the bed in her underwear while that guy was sitting on the bed side. She began to tense inevitably.

Next, the room was met with silence for some time. After a while—

"Should you ever need help in the future—Please do not hide it. If you promise me that, I'll let what happened today slide. That said, I still would prefer very much if you handed that thing over to me."

"Like I said, I refuse. However... Your good intentions make me very happy. And about the curse, I will find a better way of handling it from now on."

Really? —Haruaki nodded and got up. The bed's springs recoiling from the lightened load felt rather regretful.

"You're going to look for Fear?"

"Yeah... Things have become quite troublesome."

"Related to the Bivorio Family?"

Haruaki's face became alarmed. Lying on the bed, Kirika shook her head at him:

"I've only heard of the name, but not any details... I only speculated their involvement based on intuition. It's because of them that I was threatened, so I didn't want to think about it."

Kirika recalled a certain man. She could not predict what his next move might be.

"...Sorry, I don't know why I was threatened against helping you, nor can I reveal who was threatening me. But most likely, that faction won't be

participating proactively in the current incident. In light of their neutral stance as observers—Apart from me."

"So you're willing to help?"

"If only I could have answered the same, three days earlier..."

Although she wanted to get up, her elbows were powerless. She could not lift her body. Were the broken bones still subtly unhealed?

"You should lie down longer. I'll tell you the details next time."

"...Sorry, I guess that's the only way. I should recover completely after a while—I'll call you then. Or maybe even a visit to your house."

"Sure, call me... Then I'm off. Sleep well!"

Once Haruaki left, the room instantly became silent.

As Kirika stared blankly at the ceiling, various thoughts rushed into her mind. Ahhh, I'm so relieved. My heart feels so much lighter. I'm saved. This worst day of my life turns out to be not bad after all. He called me gentle? What a fool. Serves you right, Himura, your threats are meaningless. But come to think of it, this was so embarrassing. Nothing could be more embarrassing. Didn't that guy feel anything? For a great girl like me, moaning in such a suggestive pose? What's wrong with showing a little reaction? Ahhh~ It was such a shame when he was peering into my face just now. Why didn't he do anything? Even if he were to bring his lips down for a kiss, I wouldn't have resisted particularly—Stop it right there with these thoughts!

Turning herself over, Kirika buried her face in the blanket. Her current expression was probably the type which cannot be exposed even to the ceiling. Definitely.

"...Jeez... Absolutely ridiculous."

Normally at times like these, she would use the excuse of "who would care about a girl who wears this kind of bondage suit" as an absolute weapon to kill off her hopes.

But for some reason, only now, she did not want to think that.

Leaving the apartment, Haruaki glanced at his cellphone to find many text messages received from Konoha. He had not noticed earlier because he had set it to mute.

"W-What happened I am very worried but with Ueno-san you should be safe but if anything were to happen I would still feel very worried in any case!"

A rambling series of incomprehensible words. Anyway, Haruaki simply replied, informing her that he had accompanied Kirika home because she fainted. There was probably no need to tell Konoha anything further for the moment. Perhaps Konoha was aware of Kirika's recent condition at school, she understood immediately.

Then Haruaki met up with Konoha at the business district.

"I couldn't find either of them."

"Hmm... Well, Alice might be quite difficult to find if she decided to hide. But at any rate, we've got to find Fear. She looked a bit strange, let's hope she didn't fall into her self-abusive mode and do strange things."

"That's so true. I hope she never jumps into the sea again."

Haruaki felt that Fear probably would not go that far, but it really was quite worrying. In any case, she had to be found—Just as he was thinking to himself, Fear was found with unexpected ease.

She was standing before a retail electronics store in the business district, staring blankly at the LCD television displayed at the entrance.

"...What... is going on...? What are the chances..."

"Hey Fear, we finally found you. I can't believe you rushed out on your own."

As he patted her lightly on the shoulder, Fear turned around to face him in surprise. Then—

"Watch this! It's about to repeat again!"

"Owwwww! You're twisting my neck off, it's going to twist off!"

Clamped by her hands, Haruaki's face was brought close to the television. The screen was showing news and currently reporting the discovery of a new cube-shaped corpse.

Perhaps taken from her identification documents, the newest victim's portrait was displayed near the edge of the screen—

"Damn it, another one... Hmm? Eh, why does it feel like I've seen this person before?"

"You must have. So did I."

"Me too... Hmm, I've seen this face recently... Ah!"

As Konoha gasped, Haruaki also recalled. This was probably a picture taken from a photo album or something, right? The woman's face on the screen had very defined facial features like a model. Although he had some recollection, it felt dissonant at the same time, because the hair color was different from what he saw a few days ago. Indeed, this woman was—

"The first customer at the beauty parlor's reopening...?"

"That's right. Then there was another one, shown on the television just now, the previous victim whose face I also recall. Her face is very similar to one of the customers sitting on the sofa when Alice was getting her haircut."

Haruaki had not paid special attention to the victims' faces. After all, perhaps because very few clues have surfaced, the victims faces had not received special coverage.

"Eh? What... is this about...?"

"No idea. But if it's not coincidence or a mistake in recognition—"

Staring at the screen, Fear gulped and spoke:

"—Perhaps we've found the point of commonality."

In other words, "customers who get haircuts at the beauty parlor will be murdered," was that what was implied?

"N-No no, wait a minute. Perhaps it could be as you said, a mistake in recognition...? That said, I do recall a visit from the person shown just now..."

"Even Kuroe herself would not be able to remember every single customer, right? There's no way to confirm this."

"I want to confirm it... Is there any other way?"

"Then we need a way to find out the faces of the beauty parlor's customers... But wouldn't that require security monitoring? But Kuroe's shop doesn't have... that kind of thing... installed...?"

In the middle of speaking, Haruaki realized. Or rather, he recalled what happened during the opening of "Dan-no-ura."

Indeed, Kuroe's shop was not equipped with security monitoring. However—

'Ah, that reminds me, I must reposition the camera in my store to face yours, Kuroe-chan!'

'This way I'll be able to record Kuroe-chan's lovely face every day!'

The person bearing strange title of "the chairman of the central shopping street's Kuroe-chan fan club," had pointed his shop's security camera towards the "Dan-no-ura"—Haruaki and company had witnessed it with their own eyes.

Returning to the shopping street, they knocked on the electric appliance store's metal shutters to ask the owner to provide security camera footage. Since it was recorded on a DVD, they decided to borrow a player together as well. Of course, this went through various twists and turns, but where there was a sincere will, there was a way—More concretely, this so-called "sincere will" was a promise to provide the shopkeeper with behind-the-scenes shots of Kuroe a few days later. As a side note, the "Dan-no-ura" was completely closed down at the time, without any presence of people inside.

Then the group returned home to replay the data. Although the camera angle was quite strange, at least it offered a clear view of who entered the shop. Skipping Kuroe's expressionless V-shaped gesture of victory directed towards the camera whenever she entered or exited the shop, they basically fastforwarded everything, only switching back to normal playback speed to check when customers entered the shop. After a few hours of this—

"W-What is going on?"

"Hmm... When you suddenly asked me to 'collect portraits of the victims,' I was going to ask why... So it turns out to be for this."

Kirika was also present in the Yachi living room. Along the way home from the electric appliance store, Haruaki had received her call. He felt bad about summoning Kirika so soon after her recovery but he could not think of another solution apart from asking her for help. Then using the victim's photographs Kirika had collected from the internet, they confirmed them with the customer's faces recorded by the security camera.

The result was just as Fear predicted.

"All of them were customers at the beauty parlor. So this is what they share in common—Hmm? Class Rep, what's the matter?"

"No, I just get this feeling... Something isn't right somewhere. I don't know. Am I worrying too much?"

Kirika confirmed the victims' images on screen many times but there was definitely no mistaking their identities. Konoha inclined her head and said:

"But judging from Alice's words, her goal was apparently to have us figure out the point of commonality. But this discovery doesn't yield anything significant, right? It only raises new questions—Why would she specifically tell us about this?"

"—I think I have an idea. Haruaki, can you continue to play the footage?"

"Eh? What are you talking about, Fear? We've already confirmed all the victims."

"Don't worry about that and just play it."

Although Haruaki did not understand, he did as she told and pressed fastforward. He paused whenever customers arrived but they were all irrelevant. Continuing in this manner, they reached today's records—Until a customer's arrival after it was dark.

"Alice...? She came again!"

"Th-This doesn't look good, right? Kuroe hasn't returned home yet, something could have happened..."

"I knew it."

Ignoring Haruaki and the rest who were getting up, Fear simply stared at the screen, hugging her knees to her chest.

"As soon as you notice what's common, the problem will be solved—That's what she said. That's right, although I have no idea what her intentions are, at least I know what should be done next..."

"Fear, what's going on?"

"Look at that woman's hand. She's carrying a paper bag, right? Then look at her coming out—Yeah, it's not there, just as I thought."

Fear continued. In other words, the paper bag was given to someone inside the beauty parlor.

"I saw it with my own eyes. That paper bag contained hair from the latest victim. Because the hair-color was too fancy, I recognized it immediately. As for the person who received the paper bag—She absorbed the hair."

"Wha—?"

"It was probably given as a gift. No, maybe she was 'taste testing' the hair she cut from the customers before choosing targets who passed. That's why hair was cut from the corpses and delivered... I see now."

Haruaki gasped as he listened to Fear's mutterings. Could she be insinuating—

"Come on... No way... You're suspecting Kuroe—?"

Even so, Fear did not turn around. Haruaki simply saw her shrug.

Then she said:

"Indeed... I am suspecting Kuroe. I suspect she might be connected to the Bivorio Family."

"W-Why would you... saying something like—"

"I saw it with my own eyes. Kuroe absorbed the victim's hair that Alice had brought. My intuition told me that she was eating, no mistake about it. Why would Alice bring it to her on purpose? Why would Kuroe eat that?"

"...I have never met this person named Kuroe, so let me simply report some news."

Kirika interjected in a calm tone of voice. Closing her eyes, she spoke pensively:

"While searching for portraits on the net, I also gathered facts from the reports. After all, I joined in comparatively late. And the most recent fact revealed to the public is—Other than being made into a cube shape, there were also body parts missing from the victims. In other words, they were taken by the culprit."

"Absorbed... Perhaps there are other parts... as well?"

Haruaki was stunned. He did not want to hear this type of news. No, perhaps it was the truth, but he never expected Kuroe to be involved—

"Wait, hold on a second and calm down. Listen carefully, Kuroe has no reason to help the Bivorio Family, right? Same for Alice, she should have no reason to ask Kuroe for help. So somewhere here... There must be a misunderstanding..."

"...Oh, one more thing. Look here, this shows there's no wound on Alice's hand. But clearly she was injured in the abandoned house. I know someone who possesses healing powers. Bringing tasty human hair or whatever in exchange for healing... Is this enough to establish a cooperative relationship?"

Indeed, Alice's hand onscreen was not bandaged. Things were getting incomprehensible.

"The more I think, the fishier it gets. Besides, she didn't need to come home expressly, right? She is the one who led the Family here. Why would Alice switch targets so easily to me? It's also very strange why Kuroe would not mind cutting her hair. It's highly probable that they made a deal, such as helping them to kidnap me in exchange for not being abducted by them. Or more simply, she could already be a member of the Family—"

"Hmm~ Because I ran out of money. She followed on her own. Why she switched targets, I have no idea... Probably because Ficchi is more popular than me? After all, so long as there's no violence, my policy is to treat all arrivals as customers. Also, no matter what, I'm not going to sell my cute little self to others."

"Wha—!"

—The person who answered Fear was Kuroe, who had started standing at the living room entrance at some point. Her face was expressionless as she stared blankly as usual. Her voice also sounded quite calm.

"Kuroe? What have you been doing until now?"

"Sigh~ After closing up the shop... I had many things on my mind so I went for a walk. Along the way, I also went to buy the latest released game... My original plan was to return earlier, but I had to visit quite a few shops because the game was out of stock."

She lifted the shopping bag in her hand up high. Fear remained silent, her silver hair blocking her view.

Sighing lightly, Kuroe said:

"By the way—After some contemplation, I discovered something quite shocking. In actual fact, all the victims were customers who had visited my shop!"

"We've already confirmed that fact already. Stop playing dumb. Please explain yourself—We already know that Alice has visited your shop, bringing the victims' hair. The evidence is currently playing onscreen."

Kuroe glanced at the television and shrugged.

"She suddenly came to me, asking to have her hair cut shorter. My personal policy is to avoid turning the shop into a battlefield, so I had no choice but to trim her hair as if it were business as usual. In the end, she forced a paper bag on me as a gift. After closing the shop, I opened it for a look, only to discover it was hair I've seen before."

"You really think I'll believe that?"

"...Your suspicions run that deep? Hmm~"

Kuroe stood still with her head inclined, a troubled expression on her face. She looked like she was pondering something.

After a long while, she suddenly looked up—

"Let's do it this way then. Before my innocence is proven, you guys can imprison me."

"What?"

Haruaki poked his neck straight forward in reaction to this sudden proposal. Kuroe explained nonchalantly:

"If this is done, you guys will understand that I am not in contact with Alice, right? Although it breaks my heart to have my business interrupted for now, I want to clear my name as quickly as possible."

"There's no way of making sure you won't contact her during your imprisonment, right? This is meaningless."

"It shouldn't be meaningless. If the 'point of commonality' is being a customer of the beauty parlor, then once we close the shop, Alice will know that we have discovered it. She said that figuring it out will solve the problem, so she'd probably come here to show some sort of reaction, right?"

"Hmm. Then let's think about what she might do after she arrives... Normally, when a fellow member is imprisoned, most people would attempt a rescue, right?"

Kirika spoke calmly with her arms crossed before her chest. Kuroe nodded in agreement and turned to look at Fear again.

"Indeed. Conversely, if it were someone unrelated, she won't attempt a rescue. Could this be used as a test?"

After a moment of silence, Fear suddenly stood up.

"I have no idea what you're planning—but fine. Since you want to be imprisoned, you'll get what you wish for. After all, it would indeed bring Alice here. By let me state this for the record. I suspect you are helping that woman, so if a critical moment arrives, don't expect me to show any mercy!"

"W-Wait a minute, Fear! Can you think things over carefully!? Kuroe's explanations are not entirely impossible, right? You should calm down a bit!"

Haruaki could not contain himself any longer. He stood up and spoke impatiently. Only then did Fear look up for the first time and glare at Kuroe in the face:

"Have you forgotten? Haruaki. Perhaps everything else is all speculation, but there's one thing I saw with my own eyes. This girl ate human hair! How can this be explained? Strange, how very strange, too strange! Since curses have no effect on Haruaki, your true curse probably targets 'people around you' in actual fact! Your curse hasn't been lifted at all!"

Shouting violently, Fear shook her scattered silver hair.

"There's no success case, I am such a fool... Ahhh, but I already suspected this possibility from the start. I-I still—I still don't believe it completely! This type of ugly curse, with layer upon secure layer of curses, how could it possibly... be lifted..."

Saying that, Fear gasped with a surprise realization. But immediately, she looked down and clenched her fists—

"Cow Tits, you're more suited to this, right? You'll monitor her!"

"Hey Fear, wait!"

Ignoring Haruaki, Fear ran to her room without even looking back. Haruaki wanted to chase after her, but—

"Yachi, it's better to let her cool off on her own for now. Judging by the way she looks, your words are just going to bounce off her... Just let her calm down first."

Hearing Kirika's calm voice, Haruaki sat down again. Sighing, he buried his face in his palms. Konoha then said:

"Sigh... Why impose this kind of task on me..."

"Because it's true, Konoha, you're the best at tasks like sensing presences or surveillance."

Fear's reasons were probably not limited to that... Indeed, definitely not.

"Actually, what she really feels is—She doesn't want to suspect Kuroe either. It's obvious."

"Then why not dispense with the suspicions?"

"She's currently confused, wanting to do something no matter what... So the only thing she could do was single out the most suspicious person... She's still a child after all."

Muttering helplessly, Haruaki turned his gaze towards Kuroe.

"—Are you serious about this?"

"Of course. Provided this draws Alice here and clears my name."

"Then what about the scene Fear described...?"

Kuroe slowly lowered her gaze, then calmly—she confessed.

"It's true. I absorbed life force from human hair."

"W-Why...?"

Haruaki originally thought Fear might have been mistaken in what she saw, but hearing Kuroe's confession, he was shocked. However, as if to reassure Haruaki, Kuroe calmly explained the reason:

"But this did not come from the desires of a curse. It is simply a part of my powers, like eating for nourishment or refueling."

"Refueling?"

"Didn't I help treat your wound last time, Haru? It's not a power that conjures its effects from thin air but one that depletes a corresponding amount of life force. I am simply replenishing that life force. In the past, as a result of the curse, I 'absorbed life force from the person through the act of severing hair.' Nowadays, I 'absorb remnants directly from hair that has been cut,' something like that. The amount is quite tiny and does not affect the person whose hair was cut. It's simply reuse and recycling."

Sighing in the middle, Kuroe continued blankly:

"Because there was no need to explain explicitly, I haven't told you all until now. No... Perhaps the thought of revealing this to you, Haru, makes me feel very guilty. Although it doesn't come from a curse's desires, it's true that I find hair very tasty."

"I-I see... You don't need to feel guilty about it. It's because I was injured that you had to do it."

"...Thank you. As for consuming the hair Alice brought, it was out of a different kind of necessity unrelated to nourishment—Because I instinctively knew, it was the hair of a deceased person. Not only was it the traces of life and threads of memories, but also proof that life has ended. That type of hair... holds special meaning to someone like me who was made by implanting that type of hair. Other than consuming it as an eulogy, I cannot do anything else for it."

"Say, why don't you explain all this to Fear?"

"Do you really think she'll accept it after listening?"

Haruaki fell silent. He knew quite well—At least for now, the answer was negative.

Kuroe looked blankly into the direction of Fear's room. That said, she could not possibly see through the walls.

"...Success case, huh? She misunderstood this incident, thus feeling betrayed, she became even more confused, right? That curse actually could not be lifted—That's the message she felt like she received."

Haruaki instantly understood. 'Success case' was what Fear blurted out.

He also recalled—the expression on Fear's face when she said "I still don't believe it completely."

Ahhh... So Fear still harbored such fears.

A sense of helplessness suddenly surfaced in Haruaki's heart. It resembled both sadness and shame.

Eyeing Haruaki's expression casually, Kuroe walked over to the closet and slid open the paper door. Poking her head inside, she swayed her tiny bottom as she rummaged.

"So be it, she should listen after some time passes and she calms down—Hmm? I remember keeping it here..."

"...What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for playing cards, UNO or something similar because the nights are long. Okay, Kono-san, hurry and prepare the pillows and futons. Let's use the room in the accessory dwelling as the place for imprisonment. After all, it has a toilet and a bath."

As usual, one could hardly comprehend what Kuroe was thinking. She acted as if she were totally unfazed by the suspicions cast upon her. This sort of attitude made one feel as though the notion of Kuroe as a traitor was completely absurd.

Who knew what Kuroe was thinking as she watched Konoha sigh, but she said:

"...Looks like you're not satisfied with playing games. Then perhaps we should talk about sex instead?"

"Of course not!"

Seriously, what am I going to do with you—Konoha grumbled as she stood up.

"This leaves me no choice, but I'll just have to humor you for now... Not due to Fear-san's orders, but because you requested it yourself, Kuroe-san. I also agree about clearing your name as quickly as possible. Besides, whether you're innocent or not, Kuroe-san—although I already know the answer—Since that person will be arriving, it's a good idea to increase security around you anyway, Kuroe-san."

"Yes yes, thank you for your troubles. By the way, I've been feeling very curious about something."

Kuroe withdrew her head from inside the closet, turning her gaze.

"...Who is this person? Someone related to Haru?"

"Although this is our first meeting, based on these words of yours, I think I can understand what sort of person you are."

In response to Kuroe pointing her little finger while speaking expressionlessly, Kirika shook her head in exhaustion. Then sweeping her gaze lightly across Haruaki—

"I am simply 'Yachi Haruaki's friend.' My name is Ueno Kirika. Pleased to meet you."

Kirika seemed as if she had accepted something and was proud of the fact that she could declare this aloud.

She puffed out her chest as she spoke.

Part 8

The next morning, Kirika went to school alone. Disregarding Konoha who was tasked with heavy responsibilities, Haruaki was not happy-go-lucky enough to head off to school in this kind of situation. Before Kirika went home last night, she shrugged and told Haruaki: "I am already accustomed to being busy. Once that is treated, I am fine dealing with all the work by myself." Nevertheless, Haruaki still felt rather guilty.

Naturally, Kuroe was currently under house arrest in a room of the accessory dwelling. Konoha had spent the night in the same room as her, and the two had not separated ever since. Haruaki peeked at the situation

when he brought breakfast and lunch to them. The two girls were using the television in the room to play competitive videogames at times, playing boardgames on other occasions—To be honest, it was no different from a sleepover party. Nevertheless, Konoha remained vigilant in her monitoring duties, reporting to Haruaki with a complicated expression: "The phone did not ring. She really is not in contact with Alice. This was all expected, of course."

Meanwhile, Fear was glued to the living room television, hugging her knees, confirming whether the homicides had really subsided. If a new victim surfaced, then the 'point of commonality' identified was wrong, but so far there were no related reports.

Not long after the sun had set, the doorbell rang. Haruaki welcomed Kirika at the entrance to find her dressed in her uniform.

"Anything happened?"

"No... Absolutely nothing."

In any case, Haruaki brought her to the living room first. Then he told her he was just about to deliver dinner to the accessory dwelling—

"Is that so? Since I'm here already, I might as well go over and say hi. What about you, Fear-kun?"

Fear had her back towards Kirika when the question was asked. Kirika's voice sounded naturally gentle, vaguely reminiscent of a class representative showing care towards an unengaged member of the class.

"Hmm..."

"Let's go check out their situation? After all, the news isn't going to report anything new so soon."

"...Well... I guess I'll go..."

Fear stood up slowly. She clearly wouldn't move no matter what I said—Haruaki explained to Kirika in gratitude. I guess it's because you're more used to these things, Kirika—Or perhaps through the passage of time, Fear had calmed down to some extent? Maybe another attempt at communication could be considered.

Fear trailed listlessly at the back as they made their way towards the accessory dwelling outside. Kuroe's bedroom was room number one on the second floor.

"Hey, I've brought dinner~"

"Yes, wait a minute. All I need is a 7 to move the thief and I'll be set for victory..."

Inside the room, Kuroe was looking down at a board game while she answered inattentively. Still acting in her same old way, completely lacking in tension... Left with no choice, Haruaki entered the room and put down the dinner tray. Standing alone near the room entrance, Fear seemed to be drawing the same conclusions. One could hear her clicking her tongue in disapproval.

"Tsk... This is way too casual. Do you understand the situation at all?"

"Because having a staring competition with Kono-san here would be very boring... Besides, it'd feel weird otherwise. Or rather, since it's Kono-san here, I don't mind offering my body."

A statement delivered blankly as usual. Fear narrowed her eyes further:

"Give me a break...! I don't have time to joke around with you. This concerns people's lives, so just confess if you've given up!"

"What giving up? I haven't done anything that requires confessing."

"You're still playing dumb—"

"Fear! That's enough, calm down!"

Haruaki grabbed her by the shoulder. Fear looked as though she was about to charge over and beat up Kuroe directly. Glaring strongly, Fear's gaze wavered slightly before fleeing off somewhere.

"...I'm very calm."

"No, you're not calm at all."

Haruaki had endured for a day already. Seeing her current attitude, which seemed as though she might be open to reason, Haruaki decided to make another attempt at clearing up Fear's misunderstanding.

"It's obvious that you are just taking out your anger on others. It's easy to focus your doubt on the most obvious points of suspicion. Fear, listen to me. In what ways do you find Kuroe suspicious?"

"Basically—That woman went to the beauty parlor and give Kuroe hair that was cut from the corpses... And her wound was healed."

"Perhaps she possesses a special healing tool, who can know for sure? Besides, we were there during the reopening. Didn't that woman enter openly? It wouldn't be strange for her to make another visit—These do not constitute evidence of Kuroe assisting her."

"A-And... she absorbed the hair. I saw it unmistakably."

This was it. This was most likely the root of the misunderstanding.

"You misunderstood. Kuroe already explained that it's not a curse. She was simply absorbing the lingering life force in people's hair in order to replenish what she spent to heal me."

"That's right. I don't have to do it at all, but that'll prevent me from performing healing—I did it several times during my travels so the Bivorio Family might have witnessed it and reported to Alice. That's probably why she brought hair to me as a gift."

Kuroe supplemented the explanation. The silver hair shook.

"You're... lying..."

"Then why don't you investigate it? Simply by imprisoning her here for now, the answer will be obtained. So, assuming what you say is true and Kuroe's curse compels her to drain people's life force through their hair, then her desires should be exposed by now if her curse was not lifted, right? But she hasn't shown any such signs so far—The truth is what you wanted to believe, her curse is really lifted."

"Ah..."

"What concerns me is what you said last night. 'I already suspected this possibility from the start' or 'I still don't believe it completely' etc... You... Is that what you really believe? You think that curses can't actually be lifted?"

Haruaki peered into Fear's eyes, face to face. She lowered her head and kept trying to avoid eye contact.

After a long while, she finally whispered in a stutter:

"Not that I don't believe... However... But... Perhaps one out of ten or one out of a hundred—I can believe that at least. I do doubt... a little..."

Haruaki sighed heavily. His exasperation with Fear gradually exceeded his anger.

"Could you please not doubt that one point? Please believe it one hundred percent, okay..."

"B-But... But, I have... that kind of... curse..."

"No 'buts.' I believe it. I believe everyone's curse will be lifted—Yes, indeed. If you insist on this, then that means you distrust me, the one who believes in the lifting of curses. Think of this as I'm begging you. To be distrusted is too sad. Think of all the effort it took for us to be living together, okay? Henceforth, we'll be living together here, for years or even decades!"

Fear gasped in surprise.

"—Y-You really... believe? I... umm..."

She slowly looked up, her eyes appearing to be expecting something.

If Haruaki did not answer her immediately, he would consider himself disqualified as the master of the house.

"Of course. You can definitely become human."

More accurately, he should probably say a human-like existence. But Haruaki did not think there was anything wrong with saying it this way. Fear understood these matters. Her past and origins as a tool could not be forsaken. Nevertheless, once that kind of past became diluted, once she became an existence "approaching human" who happened to have residual abilities of a tool—

That was enough to be called human, right? Haruaki believed so. At least for a human who had been witnessing their arduous efforts by their side, this slight bias was not excessive, right? You girls have worked very hard—it would not be excessive for him to claim the right to joyfully declare this to them without pretension, right?

So that was why he said this.

Fear's gaze wavered again as she looked down. Haruaki could see her little hand clenching and opening repeatedly as if lost. He knew she was furtively glancing in Kuroe's direction. Konoha, Kuroe and Kirika all watched her intently.

"Umm... I-I..."

Fear slowly looked up. Stammering just as she was about to speak—

She involuntarily stopped moving her lips and closed her mouth. Staring wide-eyed, she gazed at a certain target.

Haruaki and the rest also followed her gaze—

"Ara ara, I'm discovered. I suppose this situation should be titled 'Strange! Flying Barbarian Woman's Head!' perhaps?"

Outside the window, a tactless female stalker's face was currently suspended upside down in midair.

Part 9

Despite the frightening sight, there was nothing supernatural about it. Most likely, Alice was simply lying on the roof of the accessory dwelling, peeping in from above. As Haruaki's group readied themselves, she spoke:

"I don't quite understand, but it feels like you're in an argument. Internal discord is not good, you know... You must get along harmoniously. Do you understand?"

Maintaining her courteous smile, she wagged her index finger from side to side.

"Alice...!"

Fear took out the Rubik's cube and transformed it into a torture tool shaped like a giant rake. Alice remained smiling as usual, the monocle over her left eye flashing from the fluorescent lighting in the house.

"Very well. Since the beauty parlor was closed, I was thinking perhaps you may have figured it out, so I came over for a look. How is it? Do you already know?"

"You're still the same, completely incomprehensible in all respects... But if you're talking about the 'point of commonality,' then I think we already know. You killed the beauty parlor's customers, is that right?"

As soon as Haruaki finished, Alice went "Oya?" and changed the angle of her tilted neck.

"If that's all you have... Then your answer is still a bit lacking. The point of commonality goes beyond that—But it's pointless if you don't understand the meaning behind it. Once you receive the message effectively, I can stop any time."

"W-What...?"

Apart from being customers of the beauty parlor, there was more in common? And what did she mean by stopping any time? Judging from her tone of voice, it was almost as if—The main point was not threatening Fear using the terrorism of killing innocents. Instead, her true goal was making them realize what the victims shared in common—

While Haruaki was immersed in these thoughts, Alice continued speaking with a mildly troubled expression:

"Oh I see, your thinking simply stopped at this point. Judging from what I've just heard—it looks like you have misunderstood, mistaken in the belief that Kuroe-sama is linked to the Family. In any case, that 'interpretation' is wrong. In delivering the hair, my original intention was to provide a hint and a special treat, could it be possible... It ended up counterproductive?"

My apologies—the upside down head swayed from side to side. Her words were enough to make Fear gasp. Nevertheless, all Haruaki obtained from Alice's statement was slight reassurance. This was only natural, seeing as he never suspected Kuroe enough to be relieved in the first place.

"Does salvation ever come without suffering? Yet meaningless internal discord caused by a misunderstanding would be unnecessary suffering, simply leading to gradual deviation from the proper path... In that case, this leaves me no choice but to push the timing for the next stage."

"What... You said timing? I'm going to have to ask you to exit the stage for causing overlapping redundancy in character archetype and manner of speaking relative to me. Naturally, I am referring to the stage of Japan."

Glaring severely, Konoha readied her karate chop.

"Then why don't you try driving me out by force, will you? What I mean by timing is precisely this... It looks like it is time to resort to slightly violent measures."

As soon as she finished, a massive shadow suddenly loomed over the glass window. It was the giant weapon, a hybrid between a hammer and a butcher's cleaver. Without any hesitation, Alice transformed the weapon's weight into destructive power—She smashed the glass window with astounding vigor.

"Nuu—!? Tsk, this is bad!"

"H-Haruaki-kun, Ueno-san!?"

Fear and Konoha abruptly looked back but it was too late. The scattered shards of glass glittered brightly as they brushed past the two non-humans, flying towards the two humans' bodies of flesh and blood.

Due to the suddenness, Haruaki could not react in time. Whether ducking down or covering his face, it was too late. His skin could feel the transparent and lethal weapons arriving to slash his carotid artery and stab his eyeballs. Just as he reflexively closed his eyes—

"Mode: «Cushioning Munemori»!"

Instantly, black hair was spread out before his eyes, in a thin layer like a protective barrier or a shield. The hair gently blocked the numerous glass fragments that attacked Haruaki and Kirika's bodies, reducing their motion almost to zero.

"Uwah~ I thought I was a goner...! Thanks, Kuroe!"

"Let me thank you as well—However, please prioritize Yachi over me next time. In situations where you cannot help both of us, it's fine to leave me unprotected. That's the kind of body I possess."

"...? I don't quite get it, but as long as things are okay."

Kuroe answered with her head slightly tilted for she did not understand the details of Kirika's condition.

Feeling someone's gaze, Haruaki looked up to find Fear with an expression like a scolded child. He also instantly realized that Fear was actually looking at Kuroe beside him.

Haruaki had tried to clear up the misunderstanding about hair consumption.

Alice's words had expressed surprise at their internal discord.

Kuroe had taken action without hesitation to protect Haruaki and Kirika.

Summing all this together, Fear finally realized she was wrong. Although she still doubted the meaning Alice intended for them to figure out—in other words, the fact that only customers of the beauty parlor were killed, there was virtually no reason for suspecting Kuroe any longer.

Seeming like she wanted to say something to Kuroe, Fear was just about to speak, but—

"Okay, where can we raise a commotion? As for me, I'm fine with anywhere."

"Freeze! I won't let you escape again!"

As if dragged down by the metal hammer, Alice fell from the window. Catching a momentary glimpse through a gap in the broken window of Alice turning her body, Konoha jumped out the window to chase after her.

"Tsk... Damn it, I still have things to say, but that can wait until later!"

"Yes, I also—"

Fear glared at Haruaki the instant he opened his mouth. She looked quite angry. Perhaps she was trying to use a vicious glare to cover up the fear and unease she was feeling inside.

"You wait here! I don't want to see anything like what happened the day before yesterday, ever again!"

The day before yesterday. She meant getting caught up in the abandoned house's collapse? It really was quite a terrifying experience, but still—

"No, but—"

"If we have no choice but to ask for help, Cow Tits should be able to phone you, right? Anyway, just leave the pursuit to those of us who are used to violence—So you stay here! Kirika and Kuroe, I leave Haruaki in your hands!"

Following Konoha, Fear jumped and disappeared through the window. Haruaki reflexively took a step forward to see where she was going, but felt a sharp pain on the sole of his foot. It was the hard sensation of glass.

"Uwah... Damn it, mere broken glass is enough to prevent me from walking, I'm so useless..."

"Don't belittle yourself, Haru. If Ficchi can say to me 'I leave Haruaki in your hands,' then that's only because you helped convince her, Haru."

"Convince huh... I simply stated out what was reasonable. Well then, what should we do? It can't be helped, should we return to the living room to wait for them to contact us? Oh yeah, Class Rep, what's the matter? What's with the pained look?"

"No, somehow I get the feeling..."

Dressed in her uniform, arms crossed before her chest, Kirika was gazing down at the glass by her feet.

"—What's the meaning of breaking the glass? She declared war intentionally but suddenly ran away, what does this all mean...? Say, Yachi, how should I put this... Perhaps I'm worrying too much, but... Don't you think we've been cleverly separated?"

"Eh?"

At that moment—

As if proving Kirika's speculation correct, Alice's voice came from the same spot as just now.

"Ara ara, looks like we have a smart one here—Though it doesn't really trouble me, really."

"__!"

It felt like time had been rewound. From the top of the broken window pane, Alice was smiling upside down, her monocle flashing over her left eye.

Had Fear and Konoha lost her trail already? Since they were not here, were those two girls still safe? Why did Alice return? What was she doing?

Haruaki and company were drowned in confusion by these questions. Alice smiled lightly and cleared her throat. Then suddenly withdrawing her face back to the roof, she disappeared from their view.

Haruaki readied his stance while Kuroe looked out the window, her hair beginning to wave—

On the other hand, Kirika—

Discovered 'it' earlier than everyone else.

"What—!"

But it was already too late.

As if having entered normally through the front door, appearing in the room behind the trio, from a direction completely opposite to the window—

Clearly she could not have moved instantaneously, but through some unknown means, she made her appearance here—

Alice, with a monocle over her right eye "«Welcome to the Other Side»!"

She was holding a glowing object in her hand. While murmuring softly, Alice pressed the object against Kuroe's back. Kuroe tried to turn around and attack with her wriggling black hair, but—

Stopped in that very instant.

Alice simply murmured a sentence and touched Kuroe's back with the glowing object to completely halt her motions. Completely frozen in an unnatural pose... As if changed back into a doll... Or perhaps, as if time had stopped for her alone.

"Ooh—"

No, for some reason, only her lips could move.

"Haru, hurry and escape...!"

"Ara ara, by the way, that would not be allowed—Moving recklessly is very dangerous! The same goes for the person over there. Unless you're unconcerned with what happens to him, please do not do anything rash."

Whoosh—Haruaki felt wind against his throat. Simply shifting his gaze down a little, found the hammer-cleaver hybrid weapon—Its cleaver portion

was being held against his throat, separated only by a hair's breadth. Despite the weapon's heavy appearance, Alice simply wielded it in one hand. The blade's cold touch and even the coarse rusty texture could be felt through Haruaki's skin. Terrible. The situation was really terrible.

"Yachi!"

"Did I not advise against rash action?"

As soon as Kirika raised her right arm slightly, Alice's blade reacted. The thick and icy sensation pressed harder against Haruaki's throat. It was a miracle he did not start bleeding.

Kirika gnashed her teeth and stopped moving. Putting the hammer and the glowing object in her other hand away, back under her nun's habit, Alice nodded with satisfaction.

"Very well, thank you. So long as you remain still obediently, I won't harm any of you."

"What do you intend to do to us?"

"Without mincing words, let's just call you hostages? Although the timing calls for measures to be taken, a direct confrontation would be rather foolhardy—By the way, please do not worry about Kuroe-sama. I have simply stopped her from moving without coming to any harm or injury. Since it might be a little uncomfortable, I allowed her eyes and mouth to move."

"...Then I guess I really should thank you."

Kuroe grumbled as she stared with sleepy-looking eyes. In a rare moment, her voice carried a tone of sarcasm. This was the most resistance Kuroe could offer with her body immobilized.

Similarly, Haruaki could only offer vocal resistance:

"Class Rep...! Hurry and escape, even if it's just you alone—"

"Ara ara, that would not be allowed. Were she to call the other two back here, it would be troublesome. I expect they will not be back in the next seven minutes."

Right, what were Fear and Konoha doing? If they were chasing after this woman, they should be back any moment now—!

Did Alice defeat them? Impossible no matter what. Then using some sort of means—Haruaki took a sideways glance at Alice's face—his gaze attracted by the shimmering monocle on her right eye. How strange, he remembered it being worn over her left eye—What on earth was going on—?

But Haruaki could not pursue this line of thought anymore. The situation did not allow for further contemplation.

With a clear voice, Alice declared:

"Would you please come along as well? Should you try to escape or make a false move, guava juice will be flowing out of his neck, okay?"

"...Understood. As you wish."

Kirika narrowed her eyes and sighed, relaxing her whole body to express surrender.

"Very good, you're quick to understand. Then could you please carry Kuroe-sama on your back? Although she cannot move according to her will, external forces can alter her posture."

Kirika silently loaded Kuroe on her back while Haruaki could do nothing but watch this scene unfold while feeling the icy-cold blade against his throat.

A most terrible development. It could only be described as most terrible.

From this instant onwards, the trio of Haruaki, Kirika and Kuroe were kidnapped by the strange woman who kept smiling even now.

Chapter 4 - The Transcenders Who Are Everywhere / "Human"

Part 1

Passing through back alleyways, the trio of Haruaki, Kirika and Kuroe were taken to a coastal area lined with warehouses. Perhaps this zone was originally abandoned, because it was completely devoid of people. Blown continuously by the sea breeze, several warehouses looked like haunted houses as they stood eerily in the darkness of the night.

Following Alice's orders, the trio entered one of the warehouses. Since it was late at night, the view was completely dark. But very soon, faint light appeared. The nearby light source was behind Haruaki—A battery-powered lantern in Alice's hand.

The dim light revealed the emptiness in the warehouse. Apart from a large freight container positioned by the wall, the remainder was a vast space with nothing but the chilly, blowing wind. Near the entrance, there was a spot with lingering signs that someone had lit firewood in the warehouse in a lapse of common sense, surrounded by piles of random articles including blankets. Alice had apparently been using this place as shelter.

"Anyway, could you please enter the freight container over there? Although it's a little cramped, you'll find it cozy once you get used to it."

Alice ordered Kirika to pull open the door with its heavy hinges and unload Kuroe inside. Her arms and legs static like a doll's, Kuroe spoke up again:

"Wow~ This suite is simply marvelous. The hard feeling of icy-cold steel against my back is simply the greatest."

Blankly, she commented with sarcasm.

Then Alice took out two sets of handcuffs from her luggage and tossed them lightly to Kirika.

"Go inside and put these on your ankles and wrists."

"..."

"Ara ara, would you like a cup of hot juice too?"

Haruaki felt the cold blade against his throat again. Kirika had no choice but to abandon the frown on her face.

"Wait, I get it... Look here, I put them on already."

"Excellent. Now you too—Oh... my? I only brought three pairs of cuffs? Never mind. In any case, please cuff your hands."

"Damn you to hell..."

Haruaki was completely reluctant to obey her, but he did not want to die either. Left without a choice, he could only handcuff his wrists.

Excellent—Satisfied, Alice pushed Haruaki from behind and shoved him into the freight container as well. The area within the container was only about the size of a school washroom and definitely not spacious, but it was not so cramped as to be impossible to move about inside. Other than the open door, a draft could be felt seeping through a gap. At least there was no danger of suffocation.

"I need to make some preparations, so please relax and get some rest for now, everyone."

Once the container door was shut, a rustling sound was heard outside. What was she preparing?

"Class Rep..."

"How troubling. Things have become absolutely ridiculous."

"Ow. Haru, don't step on my arm."

"Woah, sorry... W-What should we do?"

"Nothing can be done. The «Tragic Black River» can't open handcuffs, so we can only bide our time—That woman called us hostages so she shouldn't be doing anything to us immediately."

"I hope so..."

"Of course, we cannot let slip any chance for escape. That woman intends to make a deal with Fear and Konoha, right? In that case, I believe the instant of the exchange will be the best opportunity to take action."

"Ohoh, I see this kind of development in movies a lot."

"In the movie I saw last time, the hostage who made a false move in a similar situation got shot in the head."

"Kuroe, please don't say something so unlucky..."

While they conversed, the container's door was opened again. Blinded by the sudden brightness of the lantern, Haruaki could not keep his eyes open.

"Preparations are ready. First, allow me to give you all a present. Please accept this."

Bottles were rolled over. Five unopened bottles of mineral water. Be careful not to get dehydrated—Alice said while smiling cordially.

"Also, I'll leave this lantern here as a matter of courtesy. After all, I can burn firewood for illumination. Anyway, let's leave it at that. How about we cut to the main point? Please look this way."

"...A video camera?"

Haruaki looked up and saw Alice with a small device before her face. She was waving her hand especially happily:

"I bought this at Akihabara. As expected of a product made in Japan, it's packed full of features, it's really wonderful!"

"Hmph, looks like it can shoot a happy home video. You plan on giving it to your companions as a souvenir?"

"No, this will serve as a video letter. Those girls must be in quite a panic by now, right? Hence, I intend to send them this to disclose a bit of news. I believe an elaborate product would transmit my feelings better—Oh by the way, Kuroe-sama, I couldn't catch your face!"

"I can't move at all. Haru, please turn my neck for me."

While helping Kuroe turn her head, Haruaki glared at Alice with everything he had.

"Okay, perfect. The recording begins... Okay, Fear-sama, this is the current situation. Let me title this scene, 'Three Helpless Little Deer.' What needs to be done should be quite clear to you, right? If you wish for the safe return of these three, please accept our invitation to the Bivorio Family. I will offer utmost hospitality."

"Fear! You should know what to do!"

Haruaki could not help but yell. Yes, Fear should know what she needs to do. She will not accept these terms. She cannot choose this option. For the sake of lifting her curse, she had already decided to stay here. For the sake of lifting her curse, becoming human. Hence she absolutely was not going to go to those people—

"No no no, Fear-sama does not understand."

"What...?"

"Does salvation ever come without suffering? Indeed, because Fear-sama's salvation is needed, I have expressly prepared suffering. The homicides in the city. The need to ponder their meaning carefully to reach the truth—That kind of suffering. But with Kuroe-sama under suspicions, that became no longer possible. Hence I have no choice but to tell you all now, because this will be just as dramatic as overcoming suffering, this goes just as well. Indeed, overcoming suffering to finally uncover the truth for the first time—Only such a dramatic development could effectively transmit the true message, that is what we believe, which is why we don't talk about it lightly."

"I don't get what you mean...! What the heck are you trying to say!?"

Haruaki questioned gruffly, but Alice simply chuckled, shaking her shoulders.

"Of course I am talking about us—The Bivorio Family."

Alice slowly extended an arm, pouring forth her emotions and began explaining as if Fear were present right here. Or perhaps, this performance was targeted towards Kuroe who was immobilized.

"Indeed, I did not lie. The reason why I tried to persuade you, merely wanting to be together with you, merely wanting to have tea with you, merely wanting to chat with you, merely—a simple wish... Would you allow us to become your family?"

Haruaki gasped. There was nothing suspicious in her words. Judging purely from the content, the description did resemble the Yachi home. Similarly, Haruaki hoped to become their family. But why—Why did Alice's words produce such an intense chilling effect?

"Indeed, we hope to become your family. To become family members for you who are wonderful, you who are not human, you who are superior to mankind! There is no dilemma, nothing to hesitate about. Family offers salvation. Family offers love. Family offers recognition. Family offers affirmation. So naturally, in order to allow family to become part of our family—We insist on a single and simple principle. Listen carefully, okay?"

Alice took a deep breath. One could not feel any haughtiness from her.

But proudly, she puffed out her chest.

And declared:

"We members of the Bivorio Family—offer complete affirmation of the existences known as Wathes."

"Wha...!"

"Complete affirmation of Wathes...? What does... that mean...!?"

Halfway through, Kirika widened her eyes in surprise as if she realized something. Staring back in amusement, Alice continued:

"Indeed, complete affirmation. Naturally, this also includes the curses on the Wathes."

Haruaki was almost about to suffocate. This was absolutely too incomprehensible and his head was dizzy. What did she say? This woman just... said what...?

"We affirm curses. We affirm the curses that gave birth to transcenders like you. Curses do not require you to force yourself to bear them. Moreover, they are not something that must be removed. Transcenders should look their part as transcenders, as existences possessing superhuman powers. It is completely fine to live as you please using the power of curses. You have that right and obligation—Naturally, this applies equally to Wathes that are in the process of transforming into transcenders."

"N-No... That's wrong! That is absolutely wrong!"

Haruaki recalled the suffering brought by curses to Fear, Konoha, Sovereignty as well as Kuroe in the past—Wishing they could stop harming humans, they suffered great anguish and desperately held back.

"You think it's wrong? Now that would be the true misconception. You're unable to accept your own curse because holding it back is very painful, Fear-sama? But it's fine, there's no need to hold back, because that is what you are."

"You're insane..."

Kirika bit her lower lip and said. Haruaki agreed.

"No, the humans who forced unnecessary torment on you all are wrong. The humans who try to imprison you transcoders with human logic are wrong. The Family does not do that. If curses compel you to kill people, then go ahead and kill joyfully! If curses cause owners to go insane, then let them joyfully become the madmen who embraces and rub cheeks with you! And if curses kill the owners—Then let them joyfully offer their lives as sacrifice!"

"...Not happy at all. At least for me, treated in that manner doesn't make me happy at all."

Kuroe murmured expressionlessly. But Alice either missed it or refused to hear it.

Still smiling, she declared proudly—

"For a member of the Family, dying for a transcender is an honor. Absolute sacrifice and thoughtfulness—only those who have awakened feelings of such familial love are qualified to become members of the Family. Although numbers are few, we do have supporters. Those who were saved by the Wathes and decided to devote everything henceforth to the transcoders known as the Wathes... Indeed, I asked them for help this time."

"...Help?"

The ominous feeling in Haruaki's heart increased.

Don't listen—His instincts whispered to him. This was further insanity exhibited by madmen. Were he to listen, there would be no going back. This was the depressing truth that made him realize the decisive difference between his side and Alice's—

But Alice did not stop talking.

In a very very happy tone of voice, like a child who was showing off her prowess in a game, she continued:

"Yes. In order to dramatically express 'our affirmation of curses,' I asked several members of the Family to offer themselves in sacrifice. Everyone died joyfully!"

Part 2

'—Died joyfully!'

All thought interrupted.

Then came understanding.

Instantly, Fear kicked the table flying out of the living room by pure strength alone. The dining table crashed thunderously into the garden, but that did not matter at this time.

"Screw this, screw this, screw this...! What the heck? What is going on!?"

"—Please quiet down a bit. I can't hear the sound."

Konoha was intently watching the playing DVD. However, her fingers were busy adjusting the glasses over her sharp gaze.

Fear clenched her fists. Wanting very much to escape from the woman who was bringing up unpleasant things, she turned her gaze outside the house. The dining table lay overturned in the garden. The sky was already getting light—Then several more hours passed. Earlier, Fear and Konoha had returned home to find their important companions disappeared after Alice had vanished during the pursuit like last time. As for their discovery of the DVD in the mailbox, that took place merely half an hour earlier.

Although Fear was facing the garden, she could still hear the sound. She knew she must listen no matter what.

'Could this be—what they share in common—?'

It was Haruaki's voice. A voice that now elicited nostalgic feelings.

'Indeed, precisely this. All the people who died are members of the Family—This is the answer. Asking them to visit the beauty parlor was meant to serve as preferential treatment and a hint. What I call preferential treatment is this—Since death was coming anyway, they would offer their hair to Kuroe-sama as nourishment. As for the hint—it was to let you know their faces.'

All their reasoning was reversed—Fear instantly understood.

Rather than people who visited the beauty parlor were killed...

Simply those fated to die had visited the beauty parlor.

'...Didn't you switch targets to Ficchi? There's no particular need to service me, right?'

Fear glanced at the screen. Just like what she saw earlier, Kuroe remained motionless. Her freedom of mobility was probably taken away somehow, right?

Fear was reminded that she still had not apologized to her.

'Indeed, our primary target has changed to Fear-sama, but I still like you, Kuroe-sama, and would offer the Family's love as much as possible—Hence, not only did I visit personally to have you cut my hair, but also told other members of the Family to visit your shop as soon as they arrived to this town. Since I did not prescribe a sequence for the deaths, I allowed them to do as much as they could while they were still alive. Everyone agreed readily to it.'

Kuroe snorted through her nose as her response.

'After all, preferential treatment is simply what it is. Please don't mind it too much. By the way, speaking of which, there was another hint I prepared to help you realize what the members of the Family shared—But it looks like no one caught it. To draw a connection to my nun's habit, I ordered everyone to wear a cross ornament when entering the beauty parlor... Was that too difficult to spot?'

'! ...I see now, so that's the weird feeling I had when checking the security footage... That was it huh...'

Kirika groaned in displeasure. Oh no... Fear really wanted to tell her "Thank you for your help"... But before she had a chance to express her gratitude, this situation had arose immediately.

'The silver cross. Hair decorations. Key holders on their bags... Speaking of which, I have some recollection of them wearing those. Tsk, how could I fail to notice...?'

'I prepared many similar hints, but until yesterday, you had not even figured out that all of the deceased were customers of the beauty parlor.'

Does this country have strict standards of privacy protection? The news almost never reported on their appearance. Thus as a further hint, I snipped off some hair from a dead Family member who had had a haircut already and delivered it to Kuroe-sama. Part of the reason was also the fact that I wanted another haircut myself.'

'All thanks to you, I was involved in a great misunderstanding.'

Kuroe's statement caused Fear a pain in her chest. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

'...So what if we realize the deceased are members of the Family? What's the meaning in doing this?'

'Like I said earlier. I hoped you could realize for yourselves—The Family affirms curses. We are a wonderful organization who are willing to die for curses. In order to satisfy the curse of this «Cannibal Cooker» here, I asked them to die. And in order to convey our message to Fear-sama, I had them made into cube shapes. My original hope was for you all to solve the riddle using the clues I provided, so that you could realize the meaning behind our actions, to find out in a dramatic manner what sort of organization we are. I believed that only through this sense of drama, only by overcoming suffering before salvation to reach the truth, could you all truly experience how wonderful we are.'

After Alice finished, Kirika's bitter voice sliced through the air:

'I can't understand a thing you're saying, but let me ask you, that curse... Is there a connection to the fact that parts of the victims' bodies were removed?"

'Yes, the curse of this «Cannibal Cooker» is quite simple. It simply compels one to kill and eat people.'

'Eat...!'

Haruaki was rendered speechless.

'I only used it for the first time after coming here... But it's not very tasty actually, oh? Perhaps limited by how the news is reported, none of these details came out very well, which is partially responsible for the failure. This country feels like it was cultivated in a sterile environment, how troubling.'

Fear bit her lower lip hard. The damage to the corpses was completely unrelated to Kuroe's consumption of hair. Everything came about only because this woman and the Bivorio Family were too abnormal—

Now that Fear understood, the answer was simple. To have been manipulated so easily, she really was incompetent, how frustrating, too embarrassing—Fear felt her anger rising.

'...Okay, Fear-sama, you now understand the Family's position and the current situation, yes? Once you make a decision, please come to the location indicated on the enclosed map. I won't ask you to come alone. Similarly, I hope the glasses-wearing girl can also become family. You two may come together—Plus Kuroe-sama, I really would not mind if all three of you joined us at the same time.'

"I refuse. Indeed, I refuse. What am I thinking right now? Nothing but to make you regret the ridiculous acts you have perpetrated... This is truly all that I am feeling right now."

Konoha was murmuring in a terrifying voice, her hand still adjusting her glasses without pause.

Then the video letter ended and the screen turned dark.

Fear took a deep breath. Although she was completely at odds with Cow Tits here, only at the current moment did she feel that their minds were in complete agreement.

"When do we leave?"

"Any time."

The Japanese sword answered immediately. Had she been the one to ask first, Fear would have instantly replied the same.

Konoha stood up, her face resembling the expression Fear had seen in the night forest before—A cruel and merciless aura.

Ah... I get it. I can understand what she's feeling.

Fear felt the same way—and was desperately suppressing this anger.

She really wanted to get there earlier. To reach that guy's side as quickly as possible.

But before the that, something apparently had to be done first.

Something needed to be settled first.

"Hey, Cow Tits..."

Just as Fear spoke up—

There was a great noise from the entryway. It only sounded for an instant.

Fear and Konoha looked at each other for an instant before springing into action, rushing out of the living room.

A few mere steps were enough to reveal the reason for the noise. Completely unexpected—Whether considered as good news or bad.

Kirika was lying collapsed at the entrance, all covered in blood.

Part 3

—Tracing back a few hours earlier...

After finishing the recording, Alice closed the freight container's door again. The battery-powered lantern she left behind was glowing faintly, illuminating the narrow space.

Judging the time to be appropriate, Haruaki stood up, being the only one whose legs were free. Lowering his head to glance at Kuroe who was immobilized apart from her face—

"Kuroe, are you able to move your hair?"

"I would've done it already if I could."

I thought so too—Haruaki sighed and started to examine the door. Perhaps due to the wind blowing in from a gap, it felt even colder than further inside. But of course, it was not a gap a person could slip through, and neither could the door be opened from inside. Useless huh—Just as he sighed again, Kirika hopped over. Since her ankles were cuffed together, this was the only way she could move.

"Yachi, are there any gaps in the door?"

"Well, however I look at it there's none that..."

"Even a centimeter is enough. If the «Tragic Black River» can pass through, I might be able to move the chain from inside here."

"Oh, that's right."

Who knew if Alice was careless or complacent, she only confiscated their cellphones and did not search their bodies. Kirika had not shown the belt so far, hence fortunately, it was still wrapped around her right arm. With Kuroe still immobile, this was their only available weapon.

Haruaki and Kirika pressed their faces against the edge of the door to find a gap. However, it was still in vain.

"Useless huh..."

"Tsk... What an exceedingly simple sealed room. Looks like it needs to be dealt with in an equally simple manner."

"What do you mean?"

"Simple destructive power should be able to break open this door, allowing us to escape from here."

Yeah but—Haruaki shrugged.

"But we cannot find what's not there, no matter how hard we try. The draft here is quite cold, so let's go back deeper."

"You're... right."

Kirika hopped back towards the depths of the freight container. But no matter how athletic she was, Kirika could not have accustomed herself to moving with her ankles cuffed together like this.

"Uwah!"

Either she slipped or she tripped, Kirika fell down along the way. Although she did not get hurt—

"U-Uhhhh... Y-Yachi..."

"Uh... Yeah. As hard as it is for me to say this, but... The situation is just as you suspect, Class Rep..."

Her skirt was flipped up, revealing her bottom underneath—Haruaki could catch a glimpse of the black leather. Blushing to her ears, Kirika frantically attempted to flip her skirt back down, but because her hands were cuffed, she could not move as she wished.

"Huff... Ooh... Damn it..."

"No, ummm, no need to force yourself. Let me help you fix it. See."

Trying as much as he could to avoid looking at her bottom, Haruaki helped Kirika to flip the skirt back. She then crept to the depths of the container. Leaning her back against the wall, she yelled, still blushing:

"H-How could such a guy exist!? Flipping my skirt and then covering it again!"

"Wait a minute, I helped you cover it back up, but I never lifted it... Woah, don't glare at me! R-Relax, I only saw it for an instant, no actually, I didn't see anything at all! That's right, if you think about it, compared to yesterday, this is completely—Oh..."

"...!"

Kirika's face went even redder and she forcefully bowed her head. Seeing her reaction, Haruaki felt sorry and stopped talking. Indeed, that's right... It was not something she wanted to recall—

"Adult-looking underwear, 'compared to yesterday,' two people blushing awkwardly... What is the answer indicated by all these elements? If Ficchi and Kono-san are unaware of this, perhaps I've stumbled upon potent blackmail material."

"Woah! Oh right, you're here too... No, nothing, there's really nothing."

Oh~? Haruaki decided to ignore the blank gaze directed towards him for now.

Silently, time passed. It was getting cold. Wondering if she was cold, Haruaki looked at Kirika who was sitting opposite him. Sitting with her knees drawn up to her chest, Kirika was staring at her kneecaps in apparent contemplation. Her arms wrapped around her legs, her skirt hem was sandwiched between her ankles and her thighs, thereby covering up what was not supposed to be seen. However, her pale white knees and legs, exposed from under her skirt, looked quite cold. At this moment, the thought of leaning closer together for warmth occurred to Haruaki—Frantically, he shook his head to dispel the notion. That would be bad. Leaning together, shoulder to shoulder, their bodies against each other—that could lead to many misunderstandings! That said, it was not clear who would be doing the misunderstanding.

Suddenly—

"You... I'm surprised you're so calm."

"—Eh? R-Really? Isn't this very normal?"

"Of course it's not normal. We're being imprisoned, you know?"

"It's because Haru is like an old man. His mental age has already reached the level of an old abbot at a monastery."

Even Kuroe chimed in as well. Doesn't that sound like I'm about to croak and kick the bucket? How displeasing.

"Because struggling is useless, right? So all I can do is wait... Oh yeah, but if I were imprisoned all alone, I'd definitely be screaming and shouting in a panic, I suppose? Thanks to having the calm Class Rep and Kuroe here, I can be more relaxed... Yes, luckily, it's a great help that you two are here."

"...Really?"

Hoh—The corners of Kirika's mouth relaxed.

Then she turned her gaze away a little shyly and spoke awkwardly:

"This goes the same for me. If you were not here, I'd definitely be more flustered, yes? I am nowhere as calm as you imagine. So, umm—I also think... It's a great help to have you here... Or should I say, how fortunate to have you..."

"But the one who helps further by saving you is still me after all."

Suddenly at this time—

A voice appeared.

Without them noticing, a strange man had started standing inside the container.

For an instant, Haruaki suspected the suit-wearing man of being the superintendent. This was because his voice sounded familiar and he was wearing a mask. But this man was not the superintendent. Quite obviously not.

This was an iron mask with spikes radiating from it like a lion's mane. Probably meant for decoration, but it was especially ugly as a result, producing an atmosphere like equipment used for some strange ritual.

Despite the simple shapes used for the eyes, nose and mouth openings, there was some kind of artistic sense to them. The mask's dull color of iron wrapped the entire head. One could barely spot some fine hair at the man's neck.

"__!"

"Wha... Who... How did you get in here?"

"I didn't notice either. And to think I am supposed to be quite skilled in presence detection, although not as amazing as Kono-san."

The trio expressed their surprise respectively. Only Kirika was also gnashing her teeth as well.

"How did I get in? I simply opened the door normally and walked inside. However, it is only natural that you all failed to notice. This is the Wathe whose curse started with the anger and resentment of a certain man who died in 1703. Without even receiving a name, this man lived his entire life wearing this mask. In other words, he was treated as a human who did not exist."

Tapping the mask lightly with his finger, the man continued as if lecturing slow-witted students:

"Regarding the matter of his 'non-existing existence,' the man simply strengthened the curse progressively on this mask. After the man died, others in similar situations were forced to wear this mask: an impermissible illegitimate son of the king, an impermissible child of mixed blood between a noble and a commoner, an impermissible child of pure blood between siblings. Hence, the mask was cursed—transmuting into a Wathe that 'dilutes the wearer's presence once worn.' And its name comes from the man where it all began, people call it... «Il est dans Bastille»."^[4]

Haruaki was certain he had heard this voice somewhere before but could not place it. How strange. Despite recognizing the voice, this manner of speaking was unknown—There was this sense of contradiction.

"A mask that dilutes the wear's presence once worn...? So that means..."

"Indeed. After confirming that this Matriarch had tossed the video or something into the Yachi home, I tailed her back to this place. Then I used this mask's taboo power. For an act like opening a door, it too, can produce an effect of diluted presence, causing people to think 'it's nothing

much' and not notice—Oh dear, I've said too much. Your serious listening attitude earns you a hundred marks, Yachi-kun."

"W-Why do you know my name—"

"Oh? She hasn't told you? This is good too. I'm so glad, Kirika, how considerate of you regarding my position, yes? As expected of my—"

"Shut up!"

A curt shout. Haruaki looked speechlessly at Kirika. What was going on? They knew each other? If this was someone Kirika knew, then that meant—



"Indeed, I am a member of Lab Chief Yamimagari Pakuaki's Nation, Ueno Kirika's dependable partner, and the man who understands the princess better than anyone else."

"Sh-Shut up—Stop talking about that and answer me! You just mentioned the 'Matriarch,' so you mean—"

"Oh, so she hasn't introduced herself to you people yet? Did she playfully decide to withhold it, or did she forget... Either is possible. Oh well, let me tell you then. Of course, I am referring to the woman snoring away outside. Her name is Alice Bivorio Basskreigh—the Canonical Mother, Ms. Fanatic, the Woman Bearing the Name of Alpha, the First Matriarch. It is understood from these titles that she is the founder and head of the Family."

"This is really shocking—She's the boss? Hmm, so if she originally came to Japan to target me, that means she holds me in high regard? That said, I'm not happy about it at all."

Listening to the man as she lay on the floor, Kuroe murmured blankly.

The masked man spread his hands in an exaggerated manner towards Kirika who was glaring at him.

"Yes, which is why I said it beforehand, right? I told you not to get involved with the Family. Compared to others, their organization is more fragile, more undisciplined, ignorant—and above all, more fanatical than any other faction. Even for us, the Lab Chief's Nation, they are enemies more abhorrent than the Knights' Dominion or other organizations. We cannot enter a conflict with them as an organization."

The masked man shook his head in exasperation.

"Especially since this is Bivorio herself—the woman who is the source of all the insanity. As soon as I heard she was coming, I knew anything could happen. No matter what, I could not let the Lab Chief's sister, the princess, get involved, right? But the threat—no, my honest advice was for naught and it ended up like this. I never thought you would show him that. What a great gamble you took, Kirika."

After listening to the man and seeing the dramatic change in Kirika's expression, Haruaki instantly understood.

In a rare moment, he felt his mind instantly boiling in rage.

"You... You're the one threatening Class Rep! Even forcing her to go that far!"

"Full marks for your answer. Did you see it? Were you terrified? Did you find it disgusting? I don't suppose you were aroused? Do you reminisce over it in bed? In that case, your future might get dangerous—"

"Shut up and stop screwing around! Why are you forcing her to do that? It's all your fault, that's why Class Rep would endure to the point of fainting!"

"Yachi..."

Kirika's eyes wavered complicatedly. Handcuffed, her arms were crossed tightly before her chest.

Haruaki stood up and approached the masked man, almost about to beat him up. However—

"You ask me why? It's obvious. Of course it's for her personal safety."

"Guh..."

The man lifted Haruaki by his collar. The vicious gaze from behind the mask almost penetrated him.

"Then let me ask you, why is she being imprisoned now? Why is she handcuffed? The fact is, had she not gotten involved with the Family, this would not have happened, or am I wrong? Before I arrived, if Bivorio were to abuse Kirika, how would you stop her?"

Well—well...

Haruaki could not retort back. There was nothing he could say.

"Stop it, let go of Yachi!"

"Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori»... Still not working, I knew it."

Choked by the throat for a few seconds, Haruaki was finally tossed aside and freed. Coughing violently, he wept involuntarily. Damn it, completely shameful.

"Hmph, brat. How annoying."

Then the masked man knelt down by Kirika. Taking out a needle from his pocket, he began to fiddle with the keyhole in the cuff on her ankles. Kirika

glared at the man at close range. After a long while, the shackles were opened and the man turned to handcuffs. As the clattering sound persisted, the cuffs were opened the same way—

Kirika instantly punched the man in the gut.

"Oof... Guh... Ha... That really... hurts..."

"I am very grateful for your rescue, but I will not allow you to make a move on Yachi."

"I didn't punch or kick him, okay?"

"Shut up. Next time, if you dare—"

The man tilted his head as if completely baffled.

"Kirika, what are you talking about?"

"Wha... Are you actually..."

"I am not obliged to rescue these people as well. «Il est dans Bastille» can only erase the presence of one accompanying person at most. That is the limit."

While he spoke, the sound of something being shot was heard. Haruaki saw a flash of light erupt from Kirika's neck and the stun gun that had suddenly appeared in the man's hand. The man loaded the unconscious Kirika on his shoulder.

"—Okay, that's it. Don't resent me for this, boy and little girl."

"I resent you deeply. Hurry and save me! As a reward, you may grope me."

"I'm not interested in little kids."

The masked man quietly opened the closed door and stepped into the darkness.

Haruaki did not intend to stop him but hoped he would continue instead. Even if it was just Kirika, Haruaki hoped she could escape to safety first if possible. Haruaki had no complaints at all.

Hence—

"I leave Class Rep... in your hands."

Hearing the voice from behind, the masked man looked back in amazement.

Shrugging, he remarked in mockery:

"...What an excessively nice guy. Even when clearly you have no idea whether you'll live to see tomorrow."

Part 4

The man with no presence opened the freight container's door and walked out, carrying a girl. Even if someone were to witness this scene, they would completely dismiss it with only a slight sense of dissonance. The man did not exist and humans were unable to sense the nonexistent.

Of course, this extended to the senses of hearing and touch as well. Hence, the woman did not wake up. She was very sensitive to the presence of people approaching in her sleep. If anyone apart from this masked man walked into the warehouse, she would instantly notice. However, she did not wake up here.

Alice Bivorio Basskreigh was currently dreaming. Perhaps either the primitive warmth from the campfire beside her or the coldness of the warehouse was reminding her of her homeland. Or maybe the prospects of bringing new family home was giving her a sense of comfort. Or she was simply embarking on a journey through memory on whim.

No one knew the answer. But as it happened, she was dreaming of "home."

She had spent her life in three homes. One was her current home, the old church. One was the welfare agency where she had lived ever since she could remember as nothing but a serial number. And finally—

Despite being the same building, the old church in the past was considered a separate home from the present. Immediately after the priest adopted her from the welfare agency, it was the worst and most terrible "home" she was taken to.

She was currently dreaming of that home.

In other words—This was a nightmare consisting of fragmentary memories.

The beloved old church. After adopting a good many children from the welfare agency, the priest had said to them in front of the church—From today onwards, this is your home. I will use this place as an orphanage—Uttering such lies and truth.

Alice. Her name. The one she received when she was taken away. "You girls need names anyhow. So you're A... Alice. You're B, Bianca. You're C..." The names were chosen according to alphabetical order. The foolish children rejoiced, failing to notice that the result was identical to the welfare agency's numbering.

Work consisted of sweeping, washing clothes and other chores, and for some unknown reason, learning etiquette for facing elders. Back at the agency, children were spanked for doing things wrong, but this place was different. There was no spanking. Child G, Galatea, who took her work the least seriously, lost all the fingernails from her right hand within the span of a single day.

After roughly two months had passed, the church began to have visitors. Most of them were smartly dressed gentlemen who chatted amiably with the priest on some topic while their gentle gazes watched the children work. Those eyes, filled with tender love, were completely sincere, yet for some reason, Alice found them unbelievably disgusting.

There were two meals a day, consisting of dry bread and soup without much substance. On occasion there was some other food, most notably hot milk with honey, which was basically a luxurious feast. One day, Alice found some leftover milk in the kitchen and secretly drank it all by herself. The priest discovered her and gave her a sound beating. Sweet milk was vomited out together with digestive juices. "Sorry I lost my temper by accident. If you want to drink it that much, then it can't be helped, keep it a secret from everyone!" Then smiling gently, the priest pointed to the vomit spilled all over the kitchen floor and said: "Very well, drink it all up and leave no drop behind!"

Elena. Child E. The friend who gave Alice haircuts and watched her draw. On a certain day, she was gone. On that day, Alice watched from a window as a visitor led Elena by the hand into a car while the priest saw them off with a smile. For a long period after that, the meals were more extravagant

than ever before. Once the priest adopted a new orphan from the agency to replace Elena, Alice finally realized. This was not a church but a ranch. There was nothing here but young sows waiting to be sold.

Late one night in the chapel, Alice saw the priest weeping as he gazed at a massive and filthy cross hanging on the wall before him. Ohhh~ God, I have sinned, please forgive me. How shocking, this man had a conscience? He also had a human heart? So pure unadulterated evil did not exist in this world?

Then the priest discovered her watching from the side and hugged her with his face covered with tears. He kept repeating "sorry, sorry" over and over again—until the tears suddenly vanished from his face.

Sorry, sorry. I have finally realized, you are the most important to me, Alice. That is why I have not sold you after all this time, but kept you by my side instead. I'm sorry for making you feel lonely. We will remain together forever from now on. Ahhh, let me stroke your beautiful hair. It reminds me so much of my mother. I love you.

...Alice knew. This was contrition for the priest, but to her, this brought forth new despair.

The elderly priest seemed determined to prevent her from escaping while he caressed the twelve-year-old's hair under the cross. Ever since Elena left, Alice had started keeping her hair long. The priest held her hair against his nose, inhaling as if it were a narcotic.

Staring blankly at the design of the cross hanging high above, feeling the repulsive breath against her hair, Alice thought to herself.

—O God, what have I done wrong?

So smelly, so disgusting, so nauseating. Grotesque. It gives me goosebumps. I want to kill him so much. This is too terrifying.

—O God, is this some kind of punishment?

I want to die. Such torment. The tongue licking my hair is making me sick. I imagine squirming leeches.

—O God, why won't you save me?

—O God, may I curse you?

Part 5

She could feel shaking. A comfortable, random rocking motion.

A soft feeling against her back. A chair—no, a seat. Sleep inducing. This came as no surprise, seeing as she had been sleeping until now. Sleeping? Why was she sleeping? Until just now... What had she been doing...

As soon as her thoughts reached this point...

She instantly became wide awake.

"...Himura!"

"You woke up? How do you feel?"

Having taken off his mask, Himura was gripping the steering wheel from the driver's seat. His nonchalant expression was making Kirika feel her urge to kill rising.

"What are you doing—Turn back! Why did you leave Yachi and her behind!?"

"Because there is no reason to save them."

Gazing forwards where the car's headlights invaded the darkness sharply, the corners of Himura's mouth twisted.

"It goes without saying, you must be saved. You are my partner, the Lab Chief's younger sister, and owner of valuable Wathes—as well as the woman who should receive my love. No matter what crisis you are in, isn't it only natural that I should rush over to save you like a hero of justice?"

"Stop screwing around! You just mentioned that the Bivorio Family is mad. Leaving Yachi behind with that woman, who knows what she'll do to him...!"

"Like I said, it's none of my business. Whether that guy is killed, abused or violated by Bivorio, that has nothing to do with me. That is what I believe from the bottom of my heart."

"Even so, how could you just save me and leave him alone—You... Have you have no conscience at all!?"

Out of breath from anger, Kirika panted irregularly.

Indeed. Haruaki had said it was lucky to have her there, but now she was the only one who escaped. She was the only one residing shamelessly in safety like this—

Kirika felt nauseous from self-contempt. Had she known this would happen, she would not have allowed Himura to rescue her so easily. She would keep herself there even if it meant using the «Tragic Black River». The only reason why she had not done that—although it was only for an instant, she had thought "I'm saved now" with relief, all because of her moment of weakness. Kirika could not help but curse her carelessness.

"How troubling, why does it feel like I'm taking a class on ethics and morals? Let me tell you honestly, this weighs nothing on my conscience. Rather, I believe this is perfectly reasonable."

"What..."

"The Bivorio Family. The Yachi home. Fear-in-Cube. I am greatly interested in all phenomena related to these entities—And observing them is my job. Okay, then a certain VIP named Ueno Kirika gets mixed into the experimental farm. What should I do? Keeping the VIP safe is only natural, right? But should I take action towards the experimental farm that is already all set up? Of course not! How could any rational researcher let a rare opportunity go to waste? Of course one would avoid interfering as much as possible in the farm itself, only removing the foreign object that entered the experiment—"

Experiment. Observation. What on earth was he thinking? When clearly that person's life was on the line!

Kirika felt a stinging pain in her chest. The thorn, embedded in her heart since a long time ago, was hurting with extraordinarily sharp pain.

"...All for the sake... of research...?"

"Completely correct. All we need to concern ourselves with is the completion of the assigned research theme."

Throb. The thorn shuddered. She had intentionally ignored this thorn all this time. The thorn she pretended not to notice only because it was inconvenient to her.

"Then... Then you're just a tool for that man."

"Of course. We are all supposed to be tools for Lab Chief Yamimangari, right? Putting it another way, we are gears as part of the machinery. The all-purpose machinery, a work in progress that could answer all questions about the Wathes—We are nothing but a part of that all-purpose machinery's creation. This has been the case, from the very beginning—"

Yes, from the very beginning... It was quite clear.

Which was why she felt she was a tool, a gear.

Shying her eyes away from what was important, she ignored the thorn she had discovered very early on, turning only as a gear should. Although she disliked the job of a gear, she never deliberately attempted to stop. Because it was very easy.

However—

"...En... ough..."

"Hmm?"

She could no longer hide the pain from the thorn. She did not want to conceal it any further.

From the bottom of her heart, she disliked disguising pain.

"Enough already... I have had enough!"

With a great shout, she punched the dashboard. Greatly surprised, Himura turned to look at her. Clenching her now bleeding fist, Kirika glared at Himura intently, pouring forth all the hostility she could muster.

"Hey, what is it that you've had enough?"

"Everything! This situation, you, Yamimangari Pakuaki, and also the Lab Chief's nation! I've had enough of it all! Ha! Screw you all, everything has nothing to do with me anymore!"

"Kirika, do you understand what you are saying? Calm down. Do you realize on who's account are you able to stay here? The Lab Chief, right? Living expenses, tuition, rent? Who is protecting you? And for what reason? Precisely because you are a member of the Lab Chief's Nation, not because you're the Lab Chief's sister but as a researcher. Once you lose this title, you will be truly isolated and helpless—"

"Who cares about that! That's right, I don't care about any of this! Only because of that—"

She took a deep breath. It felt good to acknowledge and condemn the villainous practices of the Lab Chief's Nation.

Likewise for admitting her feelings in front of someone else for the first time.

"Only because of that, I can't even save the man I like! If that's the case, I am truly a tool with no meaning of existence! And that would be impossibly, incurably—Absolutely ridiculous!"

Himura widened his eyes with a face full of surprise. Kirika pounced at his hands, grabbed the steering wheel by force and turned it with all her might. The tires skidded and screeched intensely from the friction.

In barely half a second, a utility pole appeared before the dead center of the windshield.

Stopping a block of metal moving at sixty kilometers per hour did not require braking.

A collision was good enough.

"Ooh..."

Kirika escaped from the smoking carwreck. Because the door could not be opened, she smashed the window with her bare hands.

This was calculated beforehand. Without any people around, the only damage caused by the accident was the fallen utility pole. Provided she fled the scene immediately, no one was going to question her culpability.

She checked the car's condition. Miraculously, not much gasoline had leaked so there was no need to worry about a fire. Then she looked into the front seat of the carwreck to find Himura fainted on the airbag. Although he was bleeding, there were no obvious external injuries... He might have suffered internal wounds to some extent but Kirika did not want to sympathize with Himura at all.

To be frank, she was actually injured far worse. Crashing into the windshield, her head was bleeding and she had broken bones all over. The feeling of warm blood made her sick. For some reason, she found it difficult

to maintain balance. Perhaps she might even have lost an arm without noticing.

But she had to go. She must reach those girls first.

Dragging her steps painfully, Kirika made her way.

Flesh squirmed in her wounds. The sensation felt disgusting as always. But this sense of disgust was not entirely without merit. After all—Only thanks to this was she able to "risk her life to save a certain person" without hesitation. Even if she failed, she could try again any number of times.

Part 6

"...So that's the situation. Sorry, I'm the only one who..."

"No, this is not your fault. In other words, you have left the Lab Chief's Nation?"

"I suppose so... Oof!"

Lying on a living room cushion, Kirika slowly sat up.

"You're already okay?"

"Yeah—Almost healed completely. I'm ready to go any time."

Kirika was opening and closing her palm as if checking her motions. Fear was the same, ready to go any time. But Kirika's arrival had interrupted what she had originally planned to do. Fear wanted to get the matter settled first.

"Then as quickly as possible, let us—"

"Wait, Cow Tits. I have a request for you."

The eyes behind the glasses stared impatiently at Fear. Yeah, I know you want to get moving as quickly as possible, but I need closure for this first.

"Hit me."

"...Huh?"

"I was wrong in suspecting Kuroe. And because of that—it resulted in the current situation. I want this settled."

Fear stared as if trying to penetrate the glasses with her gaze. Konoha's gaze also turned sharp all of a sudden.

"Are you serious about this?"

"I am very serious. So please hit me seriously. I won't complain."

Fear watched as Konoha blinked slowly.

"Then I shall do as you wish. Brace yourself."

"Ooh—"

Tensing the corners of her mouth, Fear stuck her chest out. She had no intention of averting her gaze, but as Konoha raised her hand and swung it down vigorously, Fear closed her eyes reflexively—

Pinch.

"Hunininini!? W-Weet are yee doing? Eee'll curse yee!"

What landed on her face was neither a fist, a slap, but fingers. Fear's face was being viciously pinched.

"Hoo... Unfortunately, that's as far as my punishment will go. The rest should be left to Kuroe-san herself. I don't have the right to take that away from her."

"Hu... Nyu... Nyo... Myu!"

Konoha stretched Fear's cheeks up and down, left and right. It hurt quite a lot. Just as Fear was about to complain, the fingers finally released her—Konoha's exasperated expression returned back to solemnity.

"Understood? The past is over and done with. What matters is the future."

"...I get it, okay. What needs to be done, what should be prioritized. I will use everything available, even if it means sacrificing my all—I will take back what needs to be taken back."

"Agreed. However, let me state this for the record. The only one who can sacrifice her life is me with my infinite regeneration. Yachi will not want to return to this home without any of you... So please do not abandon your life. Neither are you allowed to leave with that woman on your own."

Kirika approached slowly. After hearing her words, Konoha twisted her lips in a smile:

"I have no intention of dying. Neither do I want to take an unhappy trip abroad during this busy time just before the sports festival."

"Of course. That woman, Alice—Bivorio right? I don't want to lose to her at all. After all, the chances of losing is even lower than the likelihood of Cow Tits' breasts being useful. I was simply expressing my determination."

"Apart from my doubts regarding the usefulness of flat chests, I agree with the rest of what you say. Okay, it's about time, right? If any preparations are needed, please make them now."

Fear expressed her readiness with a snort. However, Kirika was frowning slightly, pondering with her chin resting against her hand.

"...Ueno-san? Is anything bothering you?"

"No, rather than bothering... You're right, preparations... We need to ready everything we can beforehand. Give me five minutes."

"Sure... But what are you preparing?"

Kirika walked out of the living room with her cellphone. As Fear called out from behind, Kirika paused and turned her head. Reflected in Fear's eyes was Kirika's profile, gazing ambiguously at the ceiling.

"...Supposing Yachi has a 'power,' what do you girls think it might be?"

"Power huh... But he's just an ordinary human. You mean his immunity to curses or his shamelessness?"

"Actually there's more... He's gentle and excessively kind. Also his cooking skills?"

"Fufu, all these are correct. But I believe his greatest power is—"

Chuckling lightly, Kirika stated profoundly:

"Having 'Yachi Haruaki's friends.' Those such as me or you two here."

Part 7

The morning air was quite fresh and clear. The cold sea breeze and salty spray further emphasized the air's refreshing crispness, as if the clean

pure air were clearly stating its mission of safeguarding the peace and quiet of this vast warehouse zone.

Under Kirika's lead, Fear and Konoha made their way past the mountain of rusting freight containers, arriving at the heart of the warehouse zone—The location adjacent to the sea. As soon as they reached the target warehouse, without needing to peer inside to check the situation—

"Ara ara, good morning. Let's title this 'A Dawn-Colored Encounter'... I was thinking it was about time for you to arrive, so getting up early to prepare was well worth the effort."

In front of the warehouse, the woman dressed in a nun's habit was burning firewood. She casually drank from her mug while the hammer-cleaver stood beside her.

"Fear, Konoha! Why are you here, Class Rep!?"

"Haruaki! Are you okay?"

Haruaki's handcuffs were chained to the door handle of the warehouse. He had no external injuries at first glance. Although she knew that Alice's goal was not to kill Haruaki, Fear was still relieved at the sight.

"I'm here too, you know?"

"Kuroe-san is unharmed as well... But just as Ueno-san described, she seems to be unable to move."

Kuroe was lying on the floor in front of Haruaki, also apparently uninjured.

"Ara ara, on closer examination, I see that the escaped little miss has returned... You're human, yes? I believe that one hostage is enough, so I don't have any extra hospitality to offer you... What do you want with me?"

"On the contrary, I would like to offer you some of my hospitality. Just release those two obediently and we'll end all this with a little hospitality for you."

Kirika declared with an icy-cold gaze, extending the flowing «Tragic Black River» from her sleeve. Given the current situation, it was no longer necessary to keep it secret.

"Ara, a Wathe... I understand now, I see."

"Kirika is right. Alice—or rather, Bivorio. This is three against one, so you have no hope of winning. Just surrender without a fuss and return Haruaki and Kuroe, then we'll spare your life."

Bivorio put her cup down by her feet and asked in puzzlement:

"Ara? Have I mentioned that name to you? Oh well, it's of no consequence even if you know it... I was thinking, perhaps the Family's image might worsen if others discovered that the head was someone as laid-back as me."

At this moment—

To everyone's surprise, Konoha suddenly dashed towards Haruaki. Regardless, as soon as the hostage was freed, victory would be secured for their side—

"Ara, that's not allowed."

"!"

A gunshot. Seeing the new hole by Haruaki's feet, Konoha hastily stopped in her tracks. Bivorio apologetically waved the gun in her hand which she had just fired.

"I would be greatly troubled if you did that. How could you suddenly attempt to snatch away the prize? That would be cheating! I missed intentionally, but one false move and the next shot shall find its target. Mark my words."

Konoha gnashed her teeth. Fast as she was, she could not move faster than a bullet.

Fear took a step forward and bared her fangs:

"—Let me make this clear beforehand. If you dare shoot him, you're dead meat. I will chase you to the very ends of the earth until I kill you. I will use all the knowledge and functions I possess to torture you, to let you savor each and every humiliation recognized by mankind, then execute you, leaving not a single bone intact. Contemplate my words carefully."

"Ara, how scary. Fufu, I won't shoot him so long as Fear-sama agrees to joining my side."

Bivorio chuckled, her attitude completely opposite to what her words expressed. Indeed, she was definitely not afraid. That was the kind of people the Family was. Fanatics like this, who would go as far as to die for the sake of cursed tools.

"Since you are calling him the prize, you intend to have a match to decide the victor? Then it's simple—if I win, give Haruaki back; if you win, I'll let you take me away."

"Well said. We won't reach an agreement if this continues... I have been lacking in exercise lately, so it would be nice to play with you all. However, I'll have a tough time dealing with all of you at once, so please, may I have a one-on-one battle? I don't mind if you swap participants in the middle."

And of course—She waved her gun.

"But snatching the prize during the battle is not allowed. Even in the midst of combat, so long as I have the chance to breathe, I can deliver a bullet... Despite how I may look, I am very skilled in long range marksmanship!"

"—Very well. Kirika, Cow Tits, I'll go first. You two stand down."

"This feels difficult to accept..."

Konoha frowned and glared at Fear, who replied quietly:

"Your knife hand cannot oppose the raw destructive power of that metal hammer. Besides, the guy who would allow you to exhibit your true form is currently a captive. Kirika's belt is also unsuited to a frontal clash. I'm the only one up to the job, right?"

"Looks like there's no other way, Konoha-kun."

Fear stepped forward and took out the Rubik's cube as she heard Kirika's voice.

"Fear..."

"Haruaki, just endure a little longer... Yeah, you're such a dummy, why are you being imprisoned like a princess in distress?"

"Sh-Shut up! It's not like I wanted to be like this!"

In order to ease the tension, Fear tried to talk in her usual tone of voice. Haruaki retorted in kind.

So there was no problem. Nothing to be worried about. Definitely, things were about to return to normal.

"...You be careful."

"Who are you talking to? How could I possibly lose to that strange weapon that can't decide if it's a hammer or a spear."

Fear gazed ahead to find Alice casually holding the cross-shaped hammer-cleaver upright. Somehow she now had a gun holster at her hip where the pistol was kept.

"A strange weapon eh... And to think I was quite satisfied with this «Cannibal Cooker»'s design? I was originally worrying because this is the first time I am taking it out, but it's been easy enough to control and I would rate it highly."

"Cannibal Cooker... What a repulsive name. So its curse is the one you described in your message? I guess I'd be doing it a favor by taking care of it before its curse progresses enough to gain self-awareness."

"Why would it be repulsive? This is a rare item and quite sought after in certain circles, you know? It was first discovered in America during the first half of the twentieth century—In the home of a bizarre serial killer, hidden away from the police. Reportedly, this was the tool he created only for the sake of cooking humans."

"Hmph. Crushing human flesh with the hammer and then slicing it with the cleaver on the front end?"

"Yes. Guided by some sort of fate, it passed through the hands of various owners. Such as a certain Wisconsin-born NEET, or a certain alcoholic from Milwaukee—Naturally, its curse gradually accumulated."^[5]

Recounting with a smile, Bivorio took a step forward and slowly raised the cursed Cannibal Cooker.

"Hence, it has been blessed with rather transcendent power. Wonderful, it's truly wonderful. Fear-sama, can you understand? This is what I hope—All of you can receive more and more curses, to become more and more transcendent, to become existences transcending the one I love!"

"How could anyone hope to be cursed!? Mechanism No.14 raking type, beast's claw form: «Cat's Paw»!"

Bivorio approached, swinging the Cannibal Cooker. Fear also clutched the Rubik's cube, transforming it into a torture tool resembling a giant rake.

The heavy, human-slicing cleaver on Cannibal Cooker's front end was swung like a naganata. The claws of the «Cat's Paw» barely managed to block the attack. Then—

"—Cannibal Cleaver: 'Let's slice and dice randomly'! Reenactment: «How to Cut up Ingredients Boldly and Haphazardly»!"

The instant Bivorio declared as if singing, a strange phenomenon occurred.

For barely an instant—Cannibal Cooker's blade seemed to shift in position. A strange afterimage phenomenon.

And for some reason, the afterimage was tangible.

"Nuu...!"

The «Cat's Paw» was deflected. Fear stared wide-eyed. How bizarre.

The attack just now... Was definitely not "a single hit." Fear could feel through her torture tool as though it had received four or five chopping attacks. Casting her gaze down at the hooked claws, she found several traces where a blade had haphazardly scratched.

"What is going on...?"

"This Cannibal Cooker remembers all past actions undertaken. Consequently, it can relive those series of movements any time it wants. Speaking of slicing and dicing, it can faithfully reproduce the motions for chopping up a human body—After all, saving labor is an important part of cooking. Yes~ It's quite similar to macro commands on the computer."

"What computer—I don't know anything about that! Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi», Curse Calling!"

Fear twisted her body like the motion of a baseball pitcher and swung the massive axe down on Bivorio's head. Heavy blade struck heavy blade as two similar tools clashed with an acute noise—

"Let's shred with a thousand cuts'! Reenactment: «How to Make Long and Slender Shapes»!"

Instantly, the blade produced even more afterimages than previously. Fear felt an impact like that of a straight slash, as if Cannibal Cooker were lined with innumerable blades on both sides. Clearly she should have blocked it, but for some reason, her own axe was staggering from the impact. Withdrawing her axe before a fatal opening could arise, Fear yelled out as she performed a horizontal slash.

"Heyaaaaaa!"

"Let's cut and slice finely! Reenactment: «How to Carve Fragments Like a Monomaniac»!"

This time, there was a flash of blades that were not supposed to exist, slashing left and right endlessly. Afterimages—or multiple momentary existences. Moving and making contact unlike a blade, these visual cues prompted involuntary predictions while contradictory sensations were felt from Fear's axe. In an instant of confusion, unsure of where to apply force and how to deflect the attack, Fear found her axe easily blown away.

"Fear!"

Haruaki called out anxiously. Fear used both hands to pull back the chain of cubes. Bad. The situation was bad. Bivorio had already turned around, preparing to use another cooking method—

"This is similar too, but even simpler than yours, it merely focuses countless chopping movements in a single instant."

"Tsk... Mechanism No.8 crushing type, circular form: «Breaking Wheel of Francia»!"

Fear forcibly turned the axe into the wheel of torture, using it as a shield to block in front of her. In that instant—

"—Cannibal Hammer: 'Let's smash this over and over again!'
Reenactment: «How to Process Mince-Meat»!"

As Bivorio described, she turned her body as if dancing, using the centrifugal force to swing Cannibal Cooker's hammer. The actions performed on dozens of victims in the past were reenacted in one focused attack.

The reenactment of pure destructive power. With merely a single strike, Fear felt an illusion as if she had been struck dozens of times, as though dozens of Bivorios were attacking all at the same time.

Although the breaking wheel shielded her from getting hit directly, the astounding force of impact was still transmitted to Fear's body.

It really was capable of collapsing an abandoned house with ease. At that moment, Fear recalled that irrelevant fact—Unable to even take an evasive stance, she was easily sent flying dozens of meters away.

"Fear...!"

Haruaki felt a chill down his spine. He wanted to rush forward but there was nothing but a rattling sound as his restrained arms struggled. Naturally, all he accomplished in return was the pain from friction between flesh and metal. He clenched his jaw tightly as he watched as the silver-haired girl was swatted away. Only after a while did she finally move again. She seemed fine. Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief.

During this time, Bivorio's combat opponent had switched to Konoha instead. But just as Fear found out through battle, the Cannibal Cooker was quite powerful. Even after manifesting the sharpness of blades on her karate chops and kicks, Konoha could only engage with caution, focusing mainly on evasion. Simply stated, no matter how hard she tried to attack, it was in vain.

Once Konoha returned to her true form—Once that can be used—These notions crossed Haruaki's mind—

"Damn it...! Why am I the one who's caught....!?"

So powerless. It crossed his mind many times. As an ordinary mortal, there was nothing he could do, no way he could help. Not only that, but he was also imprisoned as a hostage. There should be limits to how much of a burden he was to the others.

"I'm caught as well. Don't blame yourself too much."

"Kuroe..."

Lying on the side, Kuroe simply moved her eyes and said:

"I was thinking perhaps I could move a bit as time went by, but nothing's changed at all. As the only one in this endless napping state, it makes me feel really bad... Seriously, although I know it's caused by a cursed tool, what kind of principle is this?"

"I was able to catch a glance, Alice—Bivorio was holding something in her hand. We just need to figure out a way to take care of that thing, then you should be able to move... I think."

"Right now, I am trying to move for the sake of 'taking care of that thing.' In terms of causality, this is really hopeless."

Kuroe sighed expressionlessly. Haruaki realized something at this moment.

"Haru, what's the matter?"

"Oh right... My situation is different from yours."

Nothing he could accomplish as an ordinary mortal? Perhaps that might be true, but currently, there was something he could do.

If one were to ask why—Kuroe's immobilization was hopeless as she said, in terms of causality. Under the effects of the unknown cursed tool, she had no solution and could not move at all.

Then what about himself?

It was merely a set of handcuffs, a simple restraining tool. What about himself, whose wrists were merely cuffed together?

"—Aha, I get it. I finally get it. If only I had realized sooner."

"Haru?"

"Kuroe, this would be bad if Bivorio noticed, so please try to be quiet. Also, once everything is over and you can move, I'll be relying on you."

"...No way! Wait!"

Haruaki could wait no longer. Who knew if Fear, Konoha or Kirika would be forced into desperation. If they were defeated, Fear and the others would fall into the hands of that insane woman, never to return again. Indeed, they would never return to the home they had resolved to live in.

Haruaki could not accept that. Hence he must take action. As the powerless hostage who dragged them down, he must free himself as soon as possible.

By any means available.

He calculated in his mind the diameters of his arm in centimeters, then the diameter of his fist in centimeters as well.

Yeah, there will be a way.

"...Ooh... Ah—!"

He pulled forcefully. Simply taking the hand that was stuck in the handcuff, he forcefully pulled, pulled and pulled!

"Haru!"

"Didn't I say... to be quiet... Ooh..."

The flesh that could not pass through the handcuff was gradually curled up and shaved off. Like the bursting of a balloon, warm fluid gushed out all at once. It's just a few dozen grams of flesh, I'm not going to die from this—He kept himself under autosuggestion. Even so, his bones creaked under the pressure while his nerves rioted with fragility. A single and simple signal was transmitting all over his body, kicking his heart heavily, jumping onto his spine and finally attacking his brain. There was a sense as if his ego had been conquered by that signal. Yes, indeed, his body was now made of pain and suffering.

Clenching his molars, Haruaki suppressed his throat from making a sound. Oily sweat dripped from his body in great amounts.

Do not scream at all costs, I cannot be discovered. Besides—

Were she to hear a familiar person's screams, Fear would be unsettled. Haruaki did not want to risk that.

Yes, this was all he was able to do. In order to save the girls, all he could was this.

Powerless, all he was able to do was endure pain, simple as that.

Hence—

"—Uwah!"

Once his fingers passed through the handcuff, the rest was simple. His right hand was extracted. Only the middle part of the handcuffs was chained, so he was now freed even though the handcuff still dangled from his left hand.

"Haru..."

"F-Fufu... Success! Yeah, once everything is over, I'll need to you to help me with your hair. Oh dear, handkerchief, handkerchief, where are you? If Konoha were to see this, she'd definitely faint. Okay... Done."

The task was completed inconspicuously. Luckily, the smiling Bivorio was occupied with Fear who had returned to battle, so now was the moment to take action.

"...Heave-ho!"

"Ohoh, the princess carry."

Haruaki scooped up Kuroe in his arms all at once and picked an escape route that would not get caught up in the battle. Bivorio instantly noticed and just as her hand reached for the holster at her hip—

"—«Tragic Black River»!"

Controlled by Kirika, the belt extended rapidly towards Bivorio, hindering her action. Konoha also charged forward from behind Fear, entering a position where she could block the shot with her body if necessary. With that, everything was perfect.

"Haruaki-kun! How did you... Your hand!"

"I simply tried my best. There shouldn't be too much blood visible—Anyway, the tides of battle have reversed with this. It seems a bit underhanded, but let's gang up on her, everyone."

"You're still worrying about underhandedness? That's really like you. But indeed, it is as you say."

Kirika shrugged and remarked.

"I-I always find a way, okay... Even on my own... However, since you want to help, everyone, it's not like I won't accept your intentions, it can't be helped! H-Hurry!"

Engaged with Bivorio slightly further away, Fear was requesting assistance as if she found it troublesome. Bivorio laughed lightly, took a great leap and distanced herself from Fear.

"Ara ara, the prize has been snatched... How troubling."

"Hmph, next it's Kuroe. I don't know what you did, but return her freedom immediately! If you do that, I'll show a little mercy in my lesson for you. You already have no hope of winning, so give up!"

"No hope of winning? Ara ara, why would that be?"

Bivorio's smile remained. The insane woman continued to maintain her smile.

Due to her excessive composure, Haruaki and company knew that she still had tricks up her sleeve.

"Next comes a group battle? Very well, that's fine too."

"...You're bluffing. The Family doesn't have a lot of members, right? And the ones who came to this area are probably all dead thanks to your insane actions earlier, right?"

"Fufu, indeed. But I also specifically requested the delivery of a tool allowing me to fight a group battle... Because it is very precious, I usually keep it at home. It is this. Some of you might have seen it already when I used it to seal Kuroe-sama's movements, yes?"

Bivorio proceeded to take out an antique-style mirror. Clutching the mirror against her chest, she happily explained, like a parent bragging "my child is so amazing."

"This «Suicidal Beautification Reflector», or SBR, is quite a transcendent Wathe. Its main taboo abilities are three in number. First is its basic ability which makes the owner beautiful. A power that all women in the world covet. But I'm quite good-looking to begin with, so I can't become even more beautiful, what a shame. The second is «Welcome to the Other Side»—Just as you can see from its use on Kuroe-sama, it seals a person's movements. In other words, it can seal someone into the world inside the mirror, yes? And the most amazing is the third ability. I'll simply show it to you all with an actual demonstration!"

Gazing deeply into the mirror she clutched with one hand, Bivorio whispered:

"«Hello to Another One»."

In the very next instant—

Right beside Bivorio, stood the figure of a second Bivorio.

Part 8

"Ufufu. Indeed—This is a replica of what's reflected in the mirror."

"Apart from the inversion of parity in the reflection's appearance, everything else is the same. The replica can talk and think. Although there is a time limit—it disappears after ten minutes—but that is not an issue seeing as even equipment can be replicated. You see, even this Cannibal Cooker is copied. The only thing that cannot be replicated is this SBR itself."

Two Bivorios—one with a monocle on her right eye and one with a monocle on her left eye—were talking in tandem.

"Wha—!"

Haruaki was rendered speechless as he recalled past events.

The position of the monocle—that sense of dissonance he had felt in the abandoned house. The first time they lost sight of her, she had already switched? The paper bills she gave to those men were most likely replicated as well. The ten-minute time limit and the way she vanished. Appearing outside the accessory dwelling's window and then running away, it was her with the left monocle. Entering the house undetected and sealing Kuroe's movements, it was her with the right monocle.

A few unnatural mysteries lingering in the depths of his mind—There was a gradual sense of satisfaction with their resolution. However, these answers to the riddle came far too late.



Letting a watch slide down one arm to her elbow, Bivorio raised Cannibal Cooker with the other arm and said:

"I suppose one could call this... A doppelganger perhaps? We all have our own individual wills, but since the clone is myself, she is self-aware of her existence as a replica, and will take action on her own accord—Yes!"

Nonchalantly, she began to use the blade to saw her own arm. At the position which was formerly concealed by the watch, Haruaki could see numerous scars that likely stemmed from the same behavior.

"W-What... are you doing..."

"Ara? Ara ara, please don't let this bother you. Just as the name of the «Suicidal Beautification Reflector» suggests, the curse compels one to do this on occasion. A girl cursing her inability to become beautiful, looking in the mirror as she slit her wrists, that is the source of this curse. However, I am already used to it. Besides, fulfilling the desires of the curse is indeed the Family's duty. This is akin to nursing a baby."

"Correct on all counts. The other me, let me help you stop the bleeding!"

"Ara ara, thank you very much, the other me."

The left-monocled Bivorio took out bandages and swiftly wrapped up the arm of the right-monocled Bivorio. Seeing the blood seeping out of the bandage, Konoha held her breath and suppressed the impulse to vomit.

"What a disgusting person. But even if you double yourself to two, we still have four on our side. We still hold numerical superiority—"

"Is that so? It's quite embarrassing, but please do not jump to conclusions too early. Because—"

Interrupting Fear, the right-monocled Bivorio lifted up the SBR and laughed:

"No one ever said the copies were limited to one!"

«Hello to Another One».

In response to Bivorio's whispers—

A third Bivorio appeared.

"Good day, another me. Although it will only be for ten minutes, I shall be in your care." "Likewise, the same goes both ways."

Taking a deep bow towards each other, the soft whispers continued. Four, five, six, one after another—

"You've got to be... kidding, right?"

"This is too abnormal, absolutely ridiculous...!"

Currently standing before the eyes of Haruaki and his group, were now innumerable—

Over twenty Bivorios, with the same smile hanging on each of their face. One of them was wearing a right monocle while holding the mirror, while the other Bivorios all had monocles on their left eye. Without exception, each and every one of them was armed with her own Cannibal Cooker.

"So that's basically it. Very well, let's start the group battle! Bring it on with everything you've got!"

"Tsk... Fakes are fakes and replicas are replicas! Other than the one holding the mirror, the rest are surely illusions! In any case, we just need to break that mirror and they'll all disappear!"

Before Haruaki could stop her, Fear lifted up the «Human-Perforator»—the drill, and charged at the crowd of Bivorios. She made a thrust towards the real Bivorio who was holding the SBR, but—

"Despite being a fake, it is also very real—Yes!"

"Wha...!"

A clone stepped in the way and rather than using Cannibal Cooker, she used her own body to block Fear's drill. It looked almost as if she offered herself to be pierced.

"Ah... Ah..."

"You see, it's very real, isn't it?"

"You see, hot blood is gushing out vigorously, isn't it?"

"You see, the flesh is moving like a toy, can you see it?"

"You see, the innards are squirming as if singing a song, can you hear it?"

After one of the Bivorios was pierced, the surrounding Bivorios remarked in amusement.

Fear made a scared expression as she stared in terror at the drill embedded in the human body with blood gushing out. Her hand trembled visibly.

"No.... I-I... had no intention... I wanted to... show mercy..."

On the other hand, the pierced Bivorio continued to smile, caressing the drill lightly. Coughing out blood, she said:

"Please savor this a bit more. It's been quite a while since you last experienced this feeling, yes?"

Bivorio pushed the drill even deeper into her body.

"Ah... Stop... it..."

"Don't be shy. Come, be my guest, kill me. Please kill me more happily. Very well, come, come, deeper, more violently, even deeper—Ah...!"

The drill penetrated Bivorio's body completely. Forced to skewer her.

The trembling of Fear's body became even more intense. Dying with a smile, Bivorio fell to the ground. Freed from the dead body's abdomen, the drill also dropped to the ground as Fear collapsed, sitting down where she was standing.

"Please bear with the ugly sight. Due to the perfection of the copy, this cannot be helped. I beg your pardon for the lingering corpse. It will disappear once the ten minutes are up."

"Guh... A-Ah... Corpse... Corpse? No, this is... a fake, I-I—Stop recalling it! No, no, this isn't one, no! I-I haven't... killed... anyone... I should have already forgotten... Forgotten the feeling... Forgotten the feeling of murder—!"

"There's no need for you to suppress it. That is what you are originally. Since you are aware of the replica, it is just a half-baked feeling; but should you have the wish, I can prepare real, live humans as your partner so that you may relish in torture and take joy in slaughter! What kind of humans do you like? Children? Women? Villains? Nobles? People you know?"

Fear hugged her shoulders and could not stop trembling. Just like the time on the rainy roof in the past, she was being devoured by her past self.

"Fear! Calm down, got that? Calm down! Stop listening to her!"

"I don't wanna... I don't wanna, I-I... don't wanna turn back into my past self... I have already decided, I have already made my decision...!"

Clutching her head, Fear shook her head like a child. Suppressing her impulses was taking all her strength. Meanwhile, Konoha was also—

"Ooh... Urghhhh. I-I can't believe, because of this...!"

Covering her mouth, Konoha's face was pale and her body was unsteady. This was bad. Seeing that staggering amount of blood, it was a miracle she had not fainted.

"Tsk—"

Kirika made her move at this time. Perhaps she decided the situation would only deteriorate if nothing was done. She extended the «Tragic Black River» towards the mirror held by the real Bivorio. But with a flash of the Cannibal Cooker's cleaver, another Bivorio chopped off the belt's front end. Unconcerned, Kirika continued to extend the belt but yet another Bivorio grabbed it while some other Bivorio pulled the belt with brute force. Stumbling, Kirika was pulled into the crowd of Bivorios.

"Guah—!"

As if reenacting an old scene, Cannibal Cooker's cleaver sliced at her body. Kirika's abdomen was dissected vertically, spilling blood everywhere. The cut open uniform slipped down, revealing what was underneath. Bivorio examined incredulously with her head tilted. The other Bivorios circled behind Kirika, grabbing her arms and lifting them up high as if cheering.

"Ara ara—You're wearing quite a strange thing, yes? Even stranger, your wound is gradually healing up, how incredible."

Suspended in midair, the «Tragic Black River» extended from Kirika's arm again but was severed by the cleaver once more.

"I am starting to get interested. Is this a Wathe too? Ah yes, how wonderfully transcendent, truly transcendent. May I examine it to confirm?"

"Ooh... A-Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhhhh! Nnngg... Guh... Yahhhh!"

One of the Bivorios reached her hand into the depths of Kirika's body, making wet and slimy noises as she stirred the insides through the sliced open flesh. Kirika stared wide-eyed in pain, saliva dripping from her mouth. Another Bivorio stabbed her cleaver into Kirika's thigh, twisting the blade in amusement. Screams, screams, screams, giggles, screams.

"Class Rep—! God damn it! Konoha, Konoha! Can you turn back into a sword?"

"Cough... Urgghh... I could turn back into a sword, but judging from the current situation... I probably... won't be of much help... You'll only... fall into danger, Haruaki-kun. It's no good... Hurry and escape... Haruaki-kun, hurry and escape—"

"How could I possibly escape!? Please, Konoha, I beg you!"

Her eyes tearful from vomiting, Konoha gazed at Haruaki for several moments. Then as if she finally accepted things, Konoha's clothes fell to the ground, no longer supported by her body. Haruaki picked up the sword in its black scabbard and rushed to rescue the abused Kirika first. Usually, Haruaki relied on Konoha's help to control his body's movements, but currently she could not offer much assistance. But at least some was better than none—

Occupied with these thoughts, Haruaki charged ahead selflessly.

Naturally, he was sent flying with but a swing of the hammer. Like what had happened to Fear several minutes earlier, he rolled along the ground, feeling the icy coldness of the road's paved surface. Had he not been wielding Konoha in his hand, he probably would have been turned into minced meat for real. However, the hand where flesh had been scraped off was violently shaken by the impact of crashing into the ground. Pain began to spread up his spine as though his nerve fibers were being drawn out and used to play cat's cradle.

"Excuse me, I am very sorry but you are the only one here who holds absolutely no interest to me. Could you please not interfere?"

"Stop... joking around. Haha, although the current situation can only be described as like a joke...!"

Mobilizing all of his convulsing muscles, Haruaki stood up while dripping with greasy sweat.

The sword remained silent. Had she fainted already? Fear was still clutching her head, trying to suppress her impulses. One of the Bivorios was whispering softly by her ear like the devil. Kuroe was still immobilized. Screaming vaguely, Kirika was being treated like a toy by several Bivorios.

The only one facing off against the remaining dozens of Bivorios was Haruaki alone. An ordinary mortal without any power.

Oh this really feels like a joke—Despair.

"If you intend to interfere, then it cannot be helped. Please be made into food!"

One of the Bivorios approached Haruaki. Experiencing a heavy weight he had never felt before, Haruaki raised his sword.

"H-Haruaki... Ooh, h-hooooh..."

Becoming aware of his situation, Fear unsteadily tried to stand up, but it was too late. No matter what she did, she would not make it in time.

In that case, Haruaki had to find a solution himself. What would work? What should he do?

Any countermeasures? Think, hurry and think—Was there any... way—

None.

Reaching this conclusion, his cortex involuntarily commanded his body to tremble, issuing orders for him to toss Konoha aside and beg for mercy. But Haruaki bit his lower lip hard and chastised his cowardly cortex. Instead, he gripped the sword even harder with his trembling hands. It would be unacceptable. No matter what happened, he did not wish to surrender, but apart from that, he could not think of any solution.

"Ara ara, you look like you're about to cry? It's okay, just close your eyes and it'll be over all at once."

Laughing lightly, Bivorio took a step forward. Just at this moment—

The current situation was completely desperate indeed. Haruaki could feel nothing but helplessness.

Restrained under the direst and most destitute of conditions, almost being toyed to death, Kirika—

Looking up blankly, she whispered as if salvation were imminent:

"Ahhh—You two finally arrived."

At this moment, the latest arrival's voice could be heard:

"What an utterly inane farce. Just hurry up and conclude it already."

Part 9

A stunning beauty was standing some distance away from the group, her long hair fluttering freely in the wind.

"I have only one word for those of you over there, occupied with cell division—Stupid. Your naivety in failing to kill me this very instant stands as a fatal mistake. Once I begin taking action, people of your ilk shall find themselves absolutely incapable of stopping me. Should you possess the ability to read the future, hurry up and weep, fools. Even if you cannot read the future, weep anyway, fools. You will lament for want of weeping, finding weeping to be essential and well worth the effort."

Her attitude was excessively supercilious. Arms crossed before her chest, the beauty declared arrogantly as if she were the very truth ruling the world. The confidence she exuded was more than enough to attract the attention of all the Bivorios.

"Very well, the stupid should just die already, thereby putting an end to stupidity. Experience this truth with your very own bodies, you, you and you. The starting words shall begin from my very arm here, ending with its descent—Go sing a song of your sad demises while you still can, saturated with admiration and ecstasy!"

The girl raised her arm. The image resembled a saint or perhaps a magician.

Visually—the effect was very beautiful and intimidating.

Even Haruaki, who clearly knew she was just an ordinary mortal, was convinced for an instant that she would work some kind of supernatural magic.

The Bivorios raised their Cannibal Cookers to enter a battle stance.

Keeping her arm raised, the girl—Shiraho—grumbled with a slight frown:

"...Could you please hurry up already, this is so embarrassing."

A brief moment later, a figure finally climbed atop a neighboring pile of freight containers.

"Eh... Uh... Umm... The Masked Maid of Justice has arrived—! Bullying people is definitely not allowed!"

The voice and attire did not quite match the situation. Standing on a freight container, her maid outfit floating lightly in the incoming wind, she was Sovereignty of course. As a side note, she was not wearing any sort of mask.

"W-Why would they..."

"...Because I felt that they are also supposed to be part of 'Yachi Haruaki's friends.' Well, I had no idea if they would agree to come or not, but I decided to inform them by phone anyway..."

On the verge of death, Kirika threw Haruaki a glance and whispered to him. But even if they came here, it would not change the situation—Just as this thought crossed Haruaki's mind, he realized he was mistaken.

Standing high above, the maid gazed upon a certain "object," took a deep breath and yelled out:

"I hold sovereignty over every doll. Those bearing visual semblance, listen and show proof of your worship—Obey!"

The Sovereignty Perfection Doll's power: manifestation of the royal authority bestowed upon her.



Indeed, she held the power to coerce any humanoid object to move—!

In that instant, the hitherto unnoticed existence started to move. The forgotten existence, dismissed as no threat. Although her ability to move autonomously was sealed away, her body could still be moved via external force. And now, under a certain person's control, she was moving.

Kuroe.

"My friend—Take care of that mirror!"

"Understood~!"

Manipulated by Sovereignty's control, Kuroe's petite body took a leap. Normally, this kind of attack would probably be struck down easily. But the current situation was different. Due to the dual impact of the bluff delivered through Shiraho's acting skills and the sudden appearance of the bizarre maid, in a fortuitous turn of events, Bivorio could not react in time as a result of the distraction.

An instant was all that was needed. Leveraging the momentum of her descent, Kuroe kicked the mirror hard. A loud shattering sound rang out.

"Oh no...!?"

The residual impact of Kuroe's kick sent the Holy Mother falling to the ground. For the very first time, her voice was mixed with anxiety. But despite the complete destruction of the mirror, its ability—«Hello to Another One»—apparently continued to persist for some time. Or perhaps the copies would survive until they reached their time limit. Numerous Bivorios rushed at Kuroe, including the one by Fear's side and the ones restraining Kirika.

However—

Another of the mirror's abilities—«Welcome to the Other Side»—apparently lost effectiveness simultaneously with the mirror's destruction.

"You really caused me a lot of stress. Sorry, I'm not going to show any mercy—Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

Kuroe's hair instantly lengthened, turning into capturing ropes as strong as steel wires. The Bivorios were instantly entangled. At such close distances, especially with the explosive divergence of Kuroe's hair in all directions,

the Bivorios were unable to escape. The only one spared was the source of the clones, the real Bivorio who had fallen on the ground. Rolling a few times along the ground to distance herself from Kuroe, she stood up, wielding Cannibal Cooker in her hand.

"Haru, these fakes will disappear sooner or later as long as I keep them captured like this. I'll leave the real one to you!"

"Hey—Fear, are you okay? Hurry and get up!"

"Yeah I know... I'm fine."

Using her drill for support, Fear slowly stood up. It looked like she had finally recovered her calm.

Then slightly fearfully, her tearful eyes, almost about to cry, turned their gaze towards two locations. One was Haruaki's right hand whose wound was hidden by a handkerchief. The other was the corpse of Bivorio's clone. However, Fear's rage ultimately trumped her terror.

"Bivorio...! Look what you've done!"

Turning the drill into a wheel of torture, Fear attacked the Holy Mother, once again engaging Cannibal Cooker in a violent clash.

"Haruaki, watch over Kirika for now! Is Cow Tits still unconscious?"

As much as Haruaki wanted to assist Fear, she had a point. Haruaki rushed over to Kirika.

"Class Rep—"

"Guh... Ah... Huff... Damn it, for her to go so far as to toy with another's body. Of course I won't die but I'll need to spend some time to heal, sorry."

"Yeah, get some rest for now. By calling those two here, you already merit the best accomplishment."

While talking to Kirika who lay on the floor as she clutched her abdomen, Haruaki turned his gaze towards Shiraho and Sovereignty who had suddenly appeared. Sovereignty was yelling: "Uwawa, so dangerous! Eh? Looks like my skirt got caught on something and flipped... And it's gradually slipping off—!" Just as always, she was acting inappropriately in light of the context. Finally, she managed to get down from the freight container and ran over to Shiraho's side where she stood in safety.

"We did it, Shiraho, the plan succeeded! We did great!"

"I was utterly embarrassed, however."

"Don't say that~ You looked like you were totally into it. Oh, Haruaki-kun. Uh~ How should we help next—" Sovereignty intended to walk over, but Shiraho grabbed her by the collar from behind.

"We are not duty-bound to go so far for them. It would be foolish to interfere and get hurt. Let's go home."

"Eh, but..."

Shiraho threw Haruaki a cold glare.

"We are indebted to these humans, so we are simply returning the favor today. I have no intention of paying extra interest."

"Uh... Well... Umm... Ahhh, stop pulling me, Shiraho! I-Is it really okay?"

Shiraho's outlook was very businesslike, but they had already provided much needed help at a critical moment. Hoping for more would probably bring about divine punishment—Besides, Haruaki could not allow two people with little combat ability to get into danger.

"It's okay, we'll handle the rest!"

Sovereignty responded to Haruaki by hunching her shoulders with a guilty conscience, waving goodbye as she went "Take care!" Then, dragged by Shiraho, they left. Seriously, these two were still acting the same as always, dispelling all the tension in the situation.

...But Haruaki and his friends could not afford to be careless. The tides had turned, but there was still something important to handle—

Haruaki turned his gaze towards the battle between Fear and Bivorio. They were dueling seriously.

A clash of weapons. And also—a clash of wills.

"Ara... Ooh, you're moving faster than before and you are stronger too, eh?"

"Of course! Because—I'm angry now!"

"But why? I love you so much, wanting to accept you as family."

"First of all! You hurt Haruaki. You made Haruaki get hurt! Secondly! You—You made me kill you! You made me remember that forgotten feeling, the one I wanted to forget!"

The inquisitional wheel that Fear threw out was blocked by Cannibal Cooker's «Shredding» and slid down. Fear did not pursue aggressively, choosing to pull the wheel back instead. This time, she performed a throwing attack.

"If you can recall it so easily, doesn't that mean there's no need to forget?"

"No way! Yes, I admit, that feeling was already etched deeply inside of me. The feeling of gouging a hole in someone with a protruding object, the feeling of a blade slicing through skin, the feeling of a human's life trembling in doubt, disappearing after a struggle! Because of that! Precisely because of that, I avoid this taboo!"

Bivorio deflected the thrown wheel using «Slicing and Dicing». Stepping forward while Fear was pulling the chain of cubes back, she said:

"Despite clearly being born for that purpose, you still wish to think that way?"

"That's right! For the sake of wiping out my past self—That very purpose is why I am here! You said you affirm curses. That's not affirming my past self but denying who I am right now! This one point—is one that I absolutely disagree!"

Wearing a nun's habit, the Holy Mother twisted her body, preparing to swing out her cross-shaped murdering culinary tool. At the same time, pulled by Fear, the inquisitional wheel returned to her hand. Then—

Bivorio performed the move that concentrated the destructive power of dozens of attack into one.

Simultaneously, Fear took her emulated form and turned it into a supermassive torture tool in no way inferior to the Cannibal Cooker.

"Let's smash this over and over again!" Reenactment: «How to Process Mince-Meat»!"

"Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern», Curse Calling!"

The tips of the two hammer-like weapons clashed violently. The two were like batters who were facing each other, or mirror images—

For an instant, it seemed as if both sides became motionless.

Supernatural destructive power was fighting, vying for supremacy between the two of them.

"Why obsess over the present!? Is there any evidence that the current you is the right one?"

"Guuuuuuuu! What evidence... I don't... care about that at all! Because—"

Fear's «Morgenstern» faltered slightly. As if pouring new strength into it, Fear yelled loudly:

"Because of Haruaki—He said I could become human! Those words... They made me really happy! I want to believe in his words... Therefore! If my current self is denied, that means denying him whom I trust! I—I—don't want that! That's simply all there is to it!"

"Ara ara, how incomprehensible!"

"—No, but I understand!"

"Haruaki...?"

Swinging the Japanese sword, Haruaki rushed over to Fear's side. If Fear was standing in the right batter's box in this analogy, Haruaki would be standing in the left batter's box. As though he were eschewing speed and accuracy in exchange for pure ultimate power, Haruaki twisted his body greatly—

"Konoha, I'm relying on you—Let's go—!"

The black scabbard smashed into the back side of the «Morgenstern» that was resisting the Cannibal Cooker.

Despite being merely a minor impact, it was enough to disrupt the stalemate in destructive power.

In that instant, «Morgenstern» broke the balance with assistance, surpassing the Cannibal Cooker and pushing forwards.

"Wha...!"

The Cannibal Cooker was deflected backwards so forcefully it seemed as if it would rip Bivorio's arm off. In addition to an ear-splitting crash, the sound of steel shattering could be heard. Cracks were appearing on the Cannibal Cooker as a result of the impact.

"Ha—insane Matriarch, I have a mother here as well! But unlike you, she doesn't yammer about love all the time and neither does she impose it on others! Learn well from her!"

Seizing the opportunity, Fear instantly transformed the «Morgenstern» to become—

"Mechanism No.29 embracing type, iconic form: «The Blessed Virgin Mary's Steel Embrace», Curse Calling!"

Consistent with its name, an iron statue of the Virgin Mary appeared. In no way inferior to Bivorio, the smile on its face was filled with tender affection while its outstretched arms appeared to be urging sinners to repent. However, its upper torso, and most prominently the chest, was shining with innumerable thorns. If these thorns were covered by a thin veil, would unsuspecting victims throw themselves onto the Virgin Mary statue at the behest of interrogators, praying to God for final salvation perhaps? Never would they expect the statue of Mary to be the tool for bringing about their demise.

However, Bivorio currently showed no inclination to confess to the thorned Virgin Mary statue. Hence, the statue of Mary took action on its own initiative, obeying Fear's will that was transmitted through the chain of cubes, charging towards Bivorio who had lost balance.

"Ooh..."

All Bivorio could do was push the Cannibal Cooker forwards to face the attack in her stead. The statue of Mary caught the Cannibal Cooker and began another contest of strength—However, signs of inevitable breakage were already apparent.

By this point, Bivorio's face had already lost its smile. There was only anxiety, doubt and puzzlement.

"Why would you refuse us so resolutely? I have said many times already, you are a transcender, a being far surpassing mankind. That is why we worship you, hoping to offer you the Family's love, wishing you could love us like family!"

"No, I am not some kind of transcender who is superior to mankind. Neither do I desire that kind of title. All I want is to become human, I just want to be human!"

"Humans are cowardly and stupid, possessing none of your strength. They are simply powerless and ordinary existences!"

Perhaps it was true. Humans were weak and fragile.

However—Precisely because of that, humans could gather together joyously, unlike tools that completed tasks alone.

Fear recalled.

What she had witnessed at Kuroe's shop, that excessively dazzling scene.

"Yeah... Very ordinary. Very ordinary indeed. The fishmonger, the fruit shopkeeper, the laundromat's owner—They're all cowardly and stupid, without the slightest power. I concede this point. However—"

She also recalled Kuroe.

She recalled the way Kuroe had become a part of the crowd. Perhaps that foreshadowed Fear's future self.

"They were all laughing! They looked very happy! I want to be like that, to join them, to become happy—What's wrong with wanting that? Until recently, I've always been alone and never had a chance to smile. That's why, the humans who can do what I cannot, to me, they are the transcenders!"

"Wha..."

Bivorio stared wide-eyed in shock. Seeing that, Fear was filled with delight and said:

"What I long for is the existence allowing me to laugh with these people and become part of their family. What I see as my goal is a way of living that is both gentle and weak. And this is called being human. And because you cannot understand this point, there can never be any consensus between us!"

Fear issued new orders to the Virgin Mary who was her emulated form. The springs, gears and other mechanisms installed inside the statue of Mary began to turn, causing the outstretched arms to come together with a

grating sound. Embracing with strength that the confessor cannot escape, then pushing out the thorns covering its body—

"Impossible... How could... this be...! Because—Because no human could save me back then! The one who saved me... The one who saved me was... Ahhh! That is why humans as transcoders... That kind of notion—absolutely cannot be possible!"

Ignoring Bivorio's words uttered out of confusion, the steel continued to grate.

Within one Holy Mother's embrace was another Holy Mother—Bivorio—and the Cannibal Cooker.

The sharp thorns pressed powerfully against the two entities. The tool, which had been used to cook dozens of people, shattered with a loud death cry as though it were weeping in contrition of its sins.

Naturally, the Holy Mother, who had been using the Cannibal Cooker as a shield, was also pierced with numerous holes of red.

Part 10

—She still remembered what had happened that particular day.

She would report to the chapel late every night. The priest's eyes reflected nothing but the imagery of his mother while he sniffed her hair. Irrefutable. She had tried refusing once and ended up with her face beaten so badly she almost thought she would die. Her cheekbone was broken and she had a fever. Ever since that time, the eye that was beaten could no longer see clearly.

Inhaling and exhaling breaths blew by her ear while a terrifying warmth patrolled her neck back and forth. The air in the chapel was exceptionally cold, causing the priest's touch to feel especially heavy while he embraced her tightly. An ugly and detestable tyrant. Only engaging in disgusting acts, a clergyman like the devil.

She gazed blankly. Indeed, on the front side of the chapel, hanging high on the wall—A simple intersection of two pairs of parallel lines, a symbol of the sacred, the only God worshiped in these filthy premises. She looked up at that shape—and cursed it.

But on this day, she suddenly tired of cursing God. She suddenly reached a realization that everything was meaningless.

Hence, she felt incurably ludicrous and laughed out loud. The priest frowned in surprise. Finding things even more ludicrous, she laughed further. Giggling, laughing. The priest roared angrily and began to beat her face. Yet she still continued laughing. The priest covered her mouth, she bit down hard. The taste of blood. Her neck strangled, unable to breathe, but none of that mattered. Ahhh~ How interesting. —, —, —. Muffled laughter. The impatient hands applied greater force. Her consciousness gradually faded, the throbbing intensified progressively. Ahhh, she was about to die. Death was coming.

Just as she realized this calmly—

How many more seconds could she laugh? Could it happen more quickly? Just as these thoughts crossed her mind—

The priest's body shuddered.

Then she saw at this moment.

That shape which had appeared at close range. From overhead, that shape which had descended silently from the place where she was gazing upwards until now.

That shape—Falling straight down heavily, had crushed the priest's body down below.

Therefore. Ahhh, therefore—

She understood. These acts of the priest's, the nightmare of this church, all were necessary suffering. Wanting to encounter God-like phenomena that transcended humans, wanting to obtain salvation, these wishes could not be allowed so easily. Only with suffering came salvation. Indeed, for the sake of salvation, suffering was essential—Hence—

"How could there be... salvation without having undergone suffering... Is my current plight... necessary suffering... that must be overcome...?"

Breathing irregularly, Bivorio gradually sat up. Her hair, which remained quite long despite having already received two haircuts from Kuroe, covered her expression. The black nun's habit was gradually dyed by red-black stains.

Clenching her fist, Fear watched her condition.

"Don't move. I held back with mercy, so you won't die if you get treated. But if you move recklessly, I can't guarantee anything."

"Ahhh... It's almost... time for the arrival..."

"Are you even listening? Listen carefully now. Promise me you'll never come back, surrender! If you do that, we'll give you treatment. Kuroe is able to heal wounds! If not, you really will die—"

Apparently not listening to Fear, Bivorio stood up. Her expression was still blocked from view. Fear bit her lower lip hard. Could you please understand, I don't want to kill you! Hurry up and say you won't return...!

At this moment, Kuroe remarked lightly: "—Oh, they disappeared." Fear glanced over to find that all the Bivorios caught by Kuroe had vanished. Breathing a sigh of relief and wiping her sweat, Kuroe turned her hair back to normal. Due to the clones' struggling attempts to break free, she had exerted quite a bit of effort to suppress them.

Walking over to Fear, Kuroe had her head tilted for some reason. Haruaki in the back was also muttering softly:

"...Fear, do you hear something?"

Perking up her ears, Fear discovered a noise that was coming from far away. The noise had a certain rhythm to it, sometimes fast and sometimes slow in a repeating cycle, beating—No, was it the sound of an engine—?

Instantly, Bivorio turned tail and ran. She was neither running towards the inland direction that was blocked by Fear and others, nor into the warehouse. Instead, her target was the vast open sea. Seeing her move, Kirika reacted and tried to extend the «Tragic Black River», but ended up collapsing on one knee. Her wounds were not healed yet.

"Kirika, don't force yourself! Damn it—"

Fear and the others hastily rushed forward but it was too late. The sea bank was not fenced and they watched as Bivorio jumped over the edge towards the sea without any hesitation at all. However, there was no splash to be heard.

Fear and company arrived at the bank, seconds too late. Only then did they understood why they had heard engine noise. There was a small

cabin cruiser where Bivorio had landed. Her deathly pale face was smiling at the cruiser's driver—A middle-aged man in a suit.

"...Thank you, my dear. I'm saved."

"Sorry for being late, there were other difficult matters to handle... Are you okay? Didn't you bring something along as my substitute?"

The man's appearance was rather striking, with bold and vigorous facial features and a thick beard.

"It broke. The SBR as well... I'm sorry, have I become ugly?"

"What are you talking about? No matter what happens, your beauty is unshakable. Regardless how effective that mirror may be, so long as the user is you, that original power of making the owner beautiful is quite meaningless, to be honest."

"I am so glad."

Bivorio and the man's lips came together. Fear had no reason to silently watch this scene proceed.

"Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes», Curse Calling!"

"Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

Fear aimed the execution stake at the cabin cruiser. Kuroe's hair of steel also followed closely behind, extending towards the two people on deck. But in the next instant—The stake was struck down and fell into the sea, while the hair was forcibly swept aside.

Wielding a giant cross, Bivorio turned around and swung forcefully.

"Ahhh, darling, darling, Abyss. My beloved Patriarch. I knew that the likes of the Cannibal Cooker could not serve as a substitute cross. The familiarity of control is completely different..."

"Ahhh, darling, darling, Alice. My beloved Matriarch. That goes without saying. Although it was only temporary, for you to be forced to snuggle against another cross, my incompetence deeply shames me."

The voice came from the cross. Obviously, the man visible just now was no longer there.

"An accomplice—and even a cursed tool as well!"

"Yes, indeed you are right... But he is not an accomplice but 'family'..."

As the cabin cruiser slowly sailed out to sea, the woman in the nun's habit embraced the cross lovingly and stumbled, collapsing.

"Are you okay, Alice?"

The cross turned back into a man and drew his face near the woman. Bivorio murmured something in his ear then closed her eyes and did not open them again. Judging from the slight heaving of her chest, she should not have died yet.

The cabin cruiser had already sailed far enough to be out of attack range. Was there nothing they could do except watch them escape? —Fear gnashed her teeth. Just at this moment—

"...Wait. Let me state this first for the record. To that man over there, listen carefully."

"Kirika?"

"Class Rep, is your body already okay...?"

Kirika had caught up to them, apparently healed. Raising her hand to cut off Fear and Haruaki's queries, she kept her gaze on the man on the cruiser.

"I am the Yamimagari Pakuaki's younger sister. Since you are from the Bivorio Family, you should have heard of this name before—And just as you witness here, I act as part of this group of people here. Do you understand? The next time you dare make a move on me or these people, be prepared to make enemies of the entire Lab Chief's Nation."

"I see, that would pose a huge problem... I shall bear this firmly in mind."

With no intention of hiding his nude and muscular body, the man answered briefly. He then turned his gaze to Fear:

"So you're «Fear-in-Cube» huh... This is the message Alice just asked me to pass along—How you wish to deal with the remains of the Cannibal Cooker and the SBR is up to you. They were originally something captured from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion. Attached to them are devices that we consider heretical and useless for our purposes."

"Muu? Could they be... Indulgence Disks?"

"That seems to be the name. In any case, if you feel the need, you may have them. This is Alice's goodwill. She sincerely wishes to love you, so please accept it."

"I'll accept the Indulgence Disks, but I refuse her whatever love—I declare myself incompatible with the Family. If you value your lives, don't ever appear before us again."

"That's not for me to decide—But I shall bear your words in mind as well."

Shrugging, the man steered the rudder as the cabin cruiser accelerated towards the sea in the distance.

I don't want to see these guys again—Those were Fear's sincere words. However—she still had questions for that man and matters which demanded his reprimand. Having lost the opportunity to do so now, Fear could only question in her mind. As a fellow cursed tool, she had doubts she could not figure out no matter what.

(You... For someone to affirm your curse, don't you feel... anything at all...? You don't find it to be a mistake...?)

Fear's fist remained tightly clenched while she continued to glare at the cruiser receding into the distance.

Finally, the engine noise could not be heard anymore and the white wake of the cabin cruiser disappeared completely.

Gazing at the sea whose peace and calm was restored, Kirika murmured:

"How troubling. Hopefully, this was enough to make them give up on Fear as their target... Now that Bivorio herself is heavily injured, they should be avoiding all-out war against the Lab Chief's Nation, right?"

"Class Rep, umm... Is this really okay?"

"Yeah. It's a little like a final prank. Since such a statement can serve as a deterrent against the Family, I had no reason not to say it."

"Final...?"

Kirika slightly relaxed the tension in her face:

"—I have already quit the Lab Chief's Nation. After I escaped, I gave that guy a taste of a horrifying lesson."

"That guy... You mean the one in the iron mask... I-Isn't that bad? Won't you get scolded or resented, Class Rep?"

"I don't care. I have already made my decision. Although I have no idea what will happen, there will always be a way."

Haruaki could sense a certain refreshing feeling in her expression. Kirika turned her gaze towards the sea again.

"I have lived as a tool all this time. Henceforth, I hope to live as a human—Fufu, indeed, I am just like Fear and the others. I am really in an equivalent position, no joke at all."

...To be honest, Haruaki did not quite understand. Perhaps because his face betrayed his thoughts, Kirika smiled:

"It's just like I've told you before. I don't need the title of the 'member of the Lab Chief's Nation' imposed on me, so I abandoned it. Instead—I have chosen for myself the title of 'Yachi Haruaki's friend.' This is simply all there is to it. Don't mind it too much."

"Speaking of minding... I just remembered. Hold out your hand, Haru."

Kuroe looked up with her blank gaze. Prompted by her reminder, Haruaki's completely forgotten pain resurged all at once. His hand currently felt as though it was being chewed apart by wild beasts.

"O-Owww... R-Right, thanks a lot."

Putting down Konoha, who was unconscious, Haruaki knelt down and untied the handkerchief that was wrapped around his hand. Kuroe and Kirika frowned. Fear, who had been gazing out at the sea, also ran over, greatly alarmed.

"Ah... Haruaki..."

Her face was completely demoralized. Gazing at Haruaki's blood-covered hand, she hunched her shoulders, silver hair trembling nonstop.

"Don't make that kind of face. It's okay."

"But... But... It looks really painful. Very painful..."

"Like I said, it's okay."

"All wrapped up—Let's do it. Mode: «Satisfied Yorimori»."

Wrapped in many layers of Kuroe's hair, Haruaki felt slight warmth on his hand. The pain subsided substantially. Then Kuroe cautiously wrapped the handkerchief over the hair.

"...Sorry."

Watching this scene, Fear murmured with her head bowed. Twice. Her apologies were directed towards Kuroe and Haruaki.

"It's my fault... Although Bivorio caused it, the root cause lies with me. It's all because I suspected Kuroe that it developed into such a bizarre situation that allowed that woman to alter her approach and capture you guys—Then your hand... became like this. Perhaps sorry cannot settle things but I still must apologize. Sorry..."

"—I really didn't mind at all. It's true that my situation was quite suspicious."

"B-Besides, getting kidnapped was because I was too stupid, and that woman was too underhanded. That's it. You don't need to be that disheartened."

Despite their efforts to comfort her, Fear's expression remained unchanged, her eyes continuing to gaze with self-loathing at the blood-stained handkerchief.

"But... Turning out like this... It's still really my fault. What should I do? If it doesn't heal, what should I do..."

"Why are you making such a big deal of it? It's not like Class Rep's case, there was a great hole in her belly."

"B-But it became like this! Like this... Flesh scraped off, so much bleeding! Ahhh, what should I do? Dummy Haruaki... What if your hand cannot move anymore, how could I possibly compensate..."

"Why do you keep thinking pessimistically? I already said it's okay! After getting home, I'm going to disinfect it carefully."

"But I-I know, human bodies are very fragile! One person became a cripple with but a single cut while someone else's heart stopped when pierced with a single spike! No one can guarantee if the same won't happen to you...!"

Her thoughts were caught in a negative spiral. How troubling—Haruaki scratched his head.

"Like I said to you already, it'll heal, okay! Look, Kuroe gave me treatment already... Right? Even without your worries, I will receive an unending stream of recovery energy. Yes, if you're so concerned, then you'll be responsible for the bandages after we get home! I'll teach you how to wrap them!"

In any case, Haruaki had to make her forget her self-loathing by giving her a mission. A correct decision, apparently. Fear blinked several times and nodded her head vigorously nonstop.

"Yes, of course... Is there anything else I could do...?"

"Eh~ Anything else...? There seems to be something..."

"Oh—Right. I remember Kuroe mentioned before that keeping the wound warm will make it heal faster. In that case—"

Fear reached out with both hands and wrapped them lightly around Haruaki's injured hand.

"How is it...?"

"O-Ohhh, hmm... Umm... Thanks."

"Hmm... Why am I not getting any feeling that it's healing faster? It need to be warmer huh... Even warmer... A warm place..."

"Well, just leave the rest to a hand warmer. It's not like you can hold my hand all day long as I can't really calm down like this. Anyway, let's... Woah, hey!?"

"Mmm..."

Haruaki's hand was pressed against some place warmer.

Namely, Fear's chest.

"How is it...? Compared to holding hands... Much warmer, right...?"

Haruaki was sitting on the ground while Fear was kneeling on both knees.

Holding Haruaki's hand tightly with her hands, Fear pressed his hand against her bosom. Although she was frequently called flat, it was not as if

she were completely flat. So in other words, there was a bosom. Even separated by clothing, Haruaki could clearly feel by touch, the domain sandwiched by the bulges on her chest. Indeed, it felt unmistakably warm. Much too warm.

"Ohhh, ooooooooi, Fear!"

"Mmm, mmm, how is it... Has it stopped hurting? Almost healed...?"

Fear's hands gently applied greater pressure, bringing a further sense of softness and warmth. Haruaki could recall Konoha doing something similar last time... No wait, now was not the time to be remembering things like that. Last time was because Konoha was half-asleep, so he decided to erase the memory from his brain. But now—Fear was completely sober. Haruaki could also hear the sound of her warm breath as he watched her quivering lashes. Oh no, this was really bad. Why did friction between clothing sound so loud? Why did Fear's hair smell so sweet?

"Oh my, Ficchi is quite bold."

"Yachi, how long... do you intend... to maintain this...?"



"Hey... Help me here! I can't take my hand away!"

"Don't take it away... I'm fine with it. Sorry I'm very small. But I'll work hard to keep you warm, so... Please continue to maintain this, okay...?"

This was bad. Fear was directing her moist gaze at him while Kuroe simply watched blankly in amusement and Kirika was about to strangle him with her belt. W-Who will hurry and save me—Just as Haruaki thought to himself—

"W-W-W-Wha—? W-What are you doing—!?"

The Japanese sword cried out with alarm from the side. Fear looked down and threw a glance at the shuddering sword.

"Tsk, the nagging woman has woken up. If only she'd continue sleeping..."

"How could I sleep in such a situation!?"

Poof! —Konoha returned to human form and approached Fear with a expression of alarm.

"Hmph, you basically slept through everything this time... How useless. Although I knew that already, nothing is worse than junk that swings around all over the place. You should keep sleeping."

"Wha... T-That's because... Umm... Indeed I cannot refute... But this is unrelated to that! Haruaki-kun doesn't like what you're doing, right? Hurry and stop this indecent behavior!"

"What are you calling indecent? This is simply healing treatment."

"What brazen cheekiness...! Anyway, put an end to this, end it!"

Konoha grabbed Haruaki's arm strenuously, trying to pull his hand away from Fear's chest by force. However, Fear pressed Haruaki's hand harder in resistance. Unable to move recklessly, Haruaki could do nothing but keep his arm tensed and immobile.

"Nuu, damn it, let go!" "No, you let go!"

"Umm, you two... Owww, hey, it really hurts!"

"See, he's crying out in pain! I will heal him, so back off, Cow Tits!"

"I understand the principle, but I cannot approve of this indecent method of treatment...! If this treatment must be done no matter what, let me do it! I'm the one who had... Umm—very clearly there is a difference in insulation ability!"

"What did you say!? Are you still bragging at a time like this!? Yours must be deceitful breasts with useless volume and nothing inside, popping with a bang at a pin's prick, so it's totally meaningless!"

As they argued back and forth, Kuroe suddenly poked Konoha on the shoulder.

"Say, Kono-san."

"What... is it? I... am... currently... busy!"

"I see that you're not getting it, so let me tell you... If you use the same treatment method as Ficchi in your current state, Kono-san, it will really be a great deal. But then again, if you're doing this with full awareness, I'm not going to stop you."

"The problem is which side would be more indecent... It's quite troubling to see Konoha-kun acting like this on occasion."

Kirika spoke with her hand on her temple. Indeed—Haruaki concentrated on transmitting his mental waves of agreement. Turning his neck with all his strength, Haruaki deliberately avoided watching the battle between the two girls.

"How so? ...Oh right, Haruaki-kun, why has your gaze been avoiding my direction all this time—!?"

As if deciding time was up for Konoha to notice herself, Kuroe pronounced blankly:

"Hmm, Kono-san, you're buck naked."

Feeling extremely exhausted, Haruaki closed his eyes. Following that, all he heard were sounds.

A supersonic scream. Then the sound of someone sprinting, undoubtedly breaking world records in track and field—or rather, the sound of fleeing.

Nice body—Kuroe whispered expressionlessly.

Shaking so openly as if showing off to others, are you mocking me! —Fear remarked angrily.

Finally, there was Kirika who was the same as usual.

Smiling slightly wryly, she offered a single comment—Absolutely ridiculous.

Epilogue

On this day, the Yachi home's garden was more noisy and bustling than usual.

"One, two... Then jump to the right! —Uwah!?"

"Kyah?"

"Ununu, you're in the way, Cow Tits! Your volume problem is gradually making Earth impossible for people to live in!"

"Y-You're the one who crashed into me! Besides, normal people cannot possibly jump three meters without a running start. You have to control your strength more! If you make the same mistake in the real performance, it will be very problematic!"

"Hmm... Now that you put it that way, I did overdo it. Hmph, I'm just putting in a bit too much effort, that's it. So all I need to do is restrict my strength. Stop nagging."

"Yes, I am becoming increasingly worried about the real performance... I hope you don't break any world records by accident."

"Konoha-kun, don't be too concerned. Fear-kun does keep her strength under control during PE class. However, she's still regarded as the number one athlete in the class."

"Well... I restrained myself too much in the beginning and ended up being thought of as a clumsy girl... I-I couldn't accept that..."

In response to Fear's explanation, Konoha smiled while Kirika turned her head lightly.

"Okay, let's start all over again. Yachi, please."

"Yes, playing now..."

Sipping tea on the veranda, Haruaki pressed play on the CD player beside him to playback the lively dance music that was going to be used in the real performance. Lined up in the yard, Fear, Konoha and Kirika began to dance to the music. For the most part, Kirika faced Fear and instructed her movements one by one.

"When exactly did she have time to learn the steps? ...But then again, she's Class Rep. Memorizing just by watching from the side is nothing strange for her."

It was a holiday today and the day for special training. Konoha was originally asked to instruct Fear, but Kirika, who for some reason had mastered the steps despite not being part of the dance team, was also teaching her. Perhaps because there were only a few days remaining until the real performance, Kirika could not help but intervene as the class representative. On the other hand, possibly because Fear's training was finally bearing fruit, her dancing started looking decent. She was now able to move her arms independently with effortless ease.

Sipping another mouthful of hot tea, Haruaki leisurely looked up at the blue sky. The pleasantly warm sunlight seemed quite out of place in autumn. Peaceful days like this were the best after all~ The tea was so tasty too~ These thoughts surfacing in his mind would definitely be derisively ridiculed as belonging to an old geezer were Taizou or Kana to hear them.

Finally back to peace—In other words, several days had passed since Bivorio was defeated and driven away. Who knew if Kirika's bluff worked, but the Family did not make any new moves for now. Speaking of changes that had occurred during this time, first there was the sealing of Fear's mechanisms, «The Blessed Virgin Mary's Steel Embrace» and the «Cat's Paw», through the insertion of Indulgence Disks. Based on what the cross man had said, the Family should have fought the Knights' Dominion in the past. On further thought, there was nothing strange about a conflict between those two organizations, one that affirmed cursed tools on one hand and one that aimed to destroy cursed tools on the other.

In any case, while pondering the seemingly destiny-guided mutual attraction between Indulgence Disks he had heard about, Haruaki had inserted the two newly obtained disks into Fear's secret slots...

"Nngg, nnnnggg... fnngggh! ...Ouch, it hurts, it really hurts, Haruaki! Be more gentle!"

"Even if you say that, I can't help it because it's really tight. Just endure a bit longer. See, I'm inserting it slowly... Say, what's this presence I've been feeling—uwah!"

Haruaki ended up discovering Kuroe behind the gap in the sliding door, expressionlessly pointing a video camera at them.

"Tsk tsk, I was hoping to capture naughty secrets of you two on video... Why do I find it so strange somewhere? But this is a rare chance, I'll record it anyway. After all, the voice track alone is already usable. Oh, please don't mind me, you two, just carry on."

In this manner, Haruaki was once again reminded of the recently returned household member's eccentric behavior.

If he had to describe further the changes occurring since that day—

"One, two, three—Good. You've improved a lot, Fear-kun."

Kirika's expression seemed much more cheerful. Until this incident broke out, she had been so gloomy—or perhaps because Kirika's unwell state was such a shock to him, Haruaki was led to this impression.

"Nuu. But I still can't understand the third action."

"Really? Then let's center the next bit of practicing on that action. The trick is to stay aware of the tips of your arms and legs."

Teaching in this manner, Kirika suddenly looked up into the sky. Wiping sweat from her forehead, she sighed:

"...Today is really hot."

"Because the weather is sunny today, Ueno-san, yet you're still wearing a long-sleeved tracksuit."

You're right—answering Konoha like that, Kirika glanced at Haruaki. Then after a long while—

"Oh well... Whatever. After all, this home's boundary walls are quite tall." A strange grumbling entered Haruaki's ears.

Then Kirika—

Began to slowly remove her tracksuit.

"!"

Kirika withdrew her legs from the pants to reveal shorts underneath. The sight of her snow-white thighs extending out from the shorts was especially refreshing. Then she took off the jacket on top. The thin fabric of her t-shirt was drenched with sweat from the physical exertion, offering a semi-transparent glimpse at the black leather underneath.

Kirika brought her removed tracksuit to the veranda, folded it neatly and put it down.

"...Stop staring at me continuously, okay?"

"Eh? Hmm... Wah... S-Sorry!"

Haruaki frantically turned his face away. Then he heard an exasperated sigh.

"No—never mind, it's not like I'm forbidding you to look completely. Umm... Rather, I suppose being seen cannot be helped, right...? Given it's here, and the one watching is you, I guess it can be considered a good thing..."

"Eh?"

"For some reason, whenever I reveal this appearance, I get very displeased with the idea that I am like 'a tool imposed with the mission of immortality.' But now, it feels like—This feeling seems to be fading. Fufu, perhaps because I have decided where I belong and what duties to fulfill? Yes, indeed. Regardless whether I am wearing this thing or not, I am human. Even if seen, I won't let any rules bind me."

"Class Rep..."

Haruaki turned his face back to find Kirika standing before his eyes, having finished folding the tracksuit. The white t-shirt fabric clung tightly to the bulging black leather on her chest, emphasizing its existence. Kirika blushed.

"D-Didn't I ask you to stop staring continuously!? This is basically underwear, so it's still embarrassing to me, you know. Besides, I'll still continue to hide it during PE class, and even if it's you, I don't like being stared at. Only because today's weather is so hot, being seen cannot be helped!"

"Uwoh! I really don't get it anymore, anyway, sorry!"

Hmph—Kirika snorted and pulled her t-shirt to make it cling less tightly to her body, then she returned to where Fear and Konoha were. The trio began to dance again. Although she said not to stare continuously, the sight easily entered his view accidentally whenever he looked in the general direction—The single color penetrating the t-shirt as well as the curves it traced out.

Wasn't this essentially asking him not to face forward? —Haruaki leaned back and collapsed as if drained of strength. Feeling the veranda floorboards against his back, he opened his eyes only to find—

The view beneath Kuroe's skirt. A delicate expanse of fluttering, wavy whiteness in an adult style—

"Uwah! Ahhh, sheesh, what is with today!?"

"Haru, you're a perv."

There was not a single shred of embarrassment in her sleepy, blank gaze. Haruaki really felt like telling her off for standing behind him with a concealed presence.

"What's the matter? What about your shop?"

"Taking a brief break. Because I remembered a few things I need to do, I need to do them now or else I'll forget. Also, everyone is gathered here doing fun things, so I'd like to experience some of that happy atmosphere."

"What excessively sloppy business management... Please, I'm begging you, seriously."

"I do work hard when it matters."

Kuroe then waved to Fear and the girls, calling them over:

"I forgot to give you wages for helping out at the opening. Thank you all for passing out flyers and other help."

She handed envelopes to Fear and Konoha. Wow! —Fear accepted the envelope with an exclamation, but—

"Wait a minute, Cow Tits, let me have a look at yours."

"What are you doing? Give it back to me!"

"Oh hoho! Fufufu, mine is heavier, it's clearly heavier—I win! This means my contributions are rated higher than yours!"

"You should check what's inside first."

Hence the two girls opened the envelopes. Konoha exclaimed softly: "Ara, that's so much!" At the same time, Fear yelled loudly: "Ohoh! What a

magnificent shiny golden color! Haruaki, this must be an amazing amount, right!?" What she ended up taking out was—

"...It's a 500 yen coin."

"Ohoh? Then what's that scrubby-looking paper Cow Tits is holding?"

"5000 yen, in other words, ten times what you have."

"...Kuroe—!"

"Just kidding. This is for you as well, Ficchi. That 500 yen can be considered a gift for celebrating your moving in as a fellow housemate."

Receiving a total of 5500 yen in the end, Fear finally surpassed Konoha and thus her self-esteem was greatly satisfied. Happily hugging money that belonged to her for the first time, she suddenly went "Ah!" and made a face as if she had recalled something. After hesitating awkwardly for a moment—

"Kirika."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"...If... that's the case... How should I say this... In other words, umm—Here, take this."

Presenting the envelope she had just received to Kirika who had widened her eyes, Fear explained:

"Umm... Because Haruaki was caught, you had to leave the Lab Chief's Nation and lost out on what you originally had. Matters like money should be more difficult for you now, right...? I am partly responsible for Haruaki getting captured, which also makes me responsible for you, Kirika, so..."

Fear continued quietly. Kirika relaxed her surprised expression gently and said:

"I can't accept this. It was a decision I made on my own volition and not anyone else's responsibility. Besides, I have quite a lot of money saved currently, which allows me to live normally for now—I am also in the process of finding a cheaper apartment."

"B-But..."

"If I wanted to, I could also work part-time. In that case, Kuroe-kun and Konoha-kun should probably be able to ask through their connections in the shopping street... This level of support is enough. Thank you, please use this money on things you like, Fear-kun."

"Hmm... Really? If you say so, it can't be helped... If you ever have any trouble, you must tell me."

"Class Rep, what about that partner you had? And what's the current situation between the various organizations?"

Kirika narrowed her eyes slightly, but replied nonchalantly:

"Nothing much. That partner did not die. I simply cut off communications on one side... No matter what happens, it's in the future anyway. There will always be a solution."

"What do you mean, there will always be a solution..."

It was too worrying. But Kirika turned her gaze away at this point and murmured as if talking to herself:

"Were anything to happen—would you help me?"

"That goes without saying. How could you treat me like an outsider by asking that?"

"Yeah, Kirika, even if you refuse to accept money, I won't allow you to refuse help."

"We are greatly indebted to you, Ueno-san. Please allow us to return the favor."

"That's right, that's right. Using our bodies... So first... strip?"

Hearing these words, Kirika half closed her eyes and smiled.

It was as if she had posed these natural questions to herself and felt embarrassed.

Making the most of Kuroe's rare presence at home, the group decided to have a break first. Haruaki and Konoha went to the kitchen to prepare tea. On the other hand, Kirika entered a washroom, saying she wanted to borrow a towel to wipe her body.

Kuroe sat blankly on the veranda, swaying her short legs. Fear also took a seat beside her because she wanted to chat with her.

"Hey, you... How do you feel now?"

"It feels so warm right now, I want to sleep."

"I'm not asking that. This is a serious question for you."

Kuroe's black hair shook and turned her eyes, more sleepy than usual, to face Fear.

"A-After seeing those people—Bivorio who used humans as tools, as well as those members of the Family who viewed themselves as tools and sacrificed their lives, I've become a bit confused. There are tools that resemble humans and also humans who are like tools. I was thinking, what exactly is the difference underlying it all?"

"...In other words, you are bothered by the definitions of what it means to be tools or humans, right?"

"That's right. So I'm asking how you feel, because I have no basis to begin imagining. You've already lifted your curse and become like a human, yet at the same time you retain your powers from your days as a tool. Which one do you consider yourself? A human who was once a tool, or a tool who has become human?"

Perhaps one might say this was mere wordplay and that there was no difference between the two. However, Fear felt that Kuroe should understand what she meant. And in fact, she did understand.

The answer Fear got was completely unexpected.

"Which one do I consider myself? I have been pondering this question all along."

"Wha—"

Fear was stunned. She originally thought she did not have the answer because she was still in the middle of her journey. However, why would Kuroe not know if she had already reached the final destination?

"I am the same as you, Ficchi. Even currently with my curse lifted."

Kuroe spoke calmly and gazed at Fear again.

"Although I've never asked, I think the same applies to Kono-san. This is a question that only existences like us would ponder. Other people might ask why get caught up in the details like this. Take the Bivorio Family for example, because you are all transcendent existences whether as a tool or a human, the issue is irrelevant for them—That's the fanatical and worshiping kind of love. Or consider Haru, because living here, we are simply who we are, he won't bother with the difference between tools and humans—That's the kind type of acceptance for what we were originally."

"But... We can't help but feel constrained by this question."

"Indeed. So lately, I've been thinking this—"

A cool breeze blew for an instant, sending Kuroe's hair fluttering. Fear's silver hair also drifted in the wind. Like holding hands together in a dance, the two colors made contact in a cool, refreshing manner.

Amidst the contrast of the two colors, Kuroe's eyes seemed exceptionally gentle.

"A simple tool won't be bothered by the question of whether it is a tool or a human, right?"

"Ah..."

Now this really resembled wordplay. Fear felt kind of deceived.

But very incredibly—The meaning behind these words felt quite comforting.

Fear chuckled lightly. Kuroe chuckled in turn. There was a mysterious sense of camaraderie between accomplices.

Perhaps it really was true. Perhaps being deceived was not bad. After all, time was on their side, now and forever.

At this moment, the doorbell's ringing could be heard in the living room.

"Good~ afternoon~! We have arrived to cheer for your special training~!"

"...I was simply dragged along. Please serve us your best tea, human."

Fear could hear this sort of dialogue coming from the entrance. Kuroe relaxed her expression slightly and whispered softly:

"...This home has become quite lively now. When I first returned home, I never could have imagined this."

"It's a lot better than a quiet home, right?"

Saying that, Fear recalled there was something she still needed to do—Indeed, her time staying at this home will persist henceforth.

So she should do this while no one else was watching.

"...How should I say this? You're much better than Cow Tits and we're both comrades in the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance."

Fear extended her hand bluntly.

"It's a little awkward to say this so late, but... Umm... Pleased to meet you, let's get along from now on."

Kuroe was taken aback for an instant. Then she exhaled slightly audibly with a wry smile.

Taking Fear's hand, she shook hands lightly.

"Pleased to meet you, Ficchi. I welcome you as your new friend—And new family."

Afterword

Surrounded by a refreshing spring breeze, let me say good afternoon to you all, dear readers. I am Minase. Although it's the season of budding greenery, let me present to you to the sometimes black, sometimes white, sometimes silver «C³ - C-Cubed III». Ohoh, doesn't it feel quite fresh to be using the color green with the kanji of "budding"^[6] ...?

Okay, in a kind of double significance, apart from the new nun-boobs character, Kuroe who was mentioned only by name in Volume 1 has finally made her appearance. Readers who had been wondering "What kind of person is Kuroe like?", this is what she is like. A ladylike bosom. Also, let me recount this conversation I had on the phone with the editor. In my mind, the pronunciation of "Kuroe" places the accent on the first syllable. Similar to words like "Gairu"(ガイル) or "Zangi"(ザンギ)... Yes, through these examples, people who don't get it might understand now?

Next, let me add a bit of info, the game Kuroe was seen playing in the story is a type of board game called "The Settlers of Catan."^[7] Many years ago, I only learned of its existence when Kouda Gakuto-san taught me the rules of the game. But this game is so fun that I am reminded that games are not just digital existences. Also, Kouda-san is always so cool and super strong~

By the way, in this Volume 3, Class Rep's role seems to be slightly abundant, with this and that sort of scenes, so Kirika fans please look forward to them! Or perhaps you have already enjoyed them? While making this sort of chitchat for business purposes, I'd like to express my thanks. Editor Kawamoto-sama, sorry all the trouble I've caused you with this volume, I really apologize. I will continue to try my best. Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, I am truly thankful for your wonderful illustrations again, so moe they could almost kill. I already couldn't bear how moe they were when I saw them at the draft stage! I really look forward to how Fear would look like in the actual book. I will continue to be in your care~!

Then there is everyone who participated in the publishing of this book, and all the readers, thank you very much! Your love sustains my life...! No, I'm completely serious.

Oh I almost forgot, there's something I need to tell everyone. Published for sale during the same month as this book, in the Dengeki Bunko magazine, there should be a C³ short story (if all goes well). It sort of feels like the "white" portions taken out from the main story, please enjoy it if you have the chance~! Unlike Dengeki hp, this is treated as a magazine and not a book (you cannot order it once the issue is over), so you won't see it again should you miss this chance.

Well then, let's end the chatting here. I have a feeling we will meet again for C³ IV.

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Picture: the name Kuroe(黒繪) consists of the kanji kuro(黒), meaning black, and e(繪), meaning picture or drawing.
2. ↑ Hand warmer(懐炉): small (mostly disposable) packets that produce heat on demand.
3. ↑ Souchuu highball: often abbreviated to chuuhai(チューハイ), a Japanese alcoholic drink traditionally mixed from shouchuu liquor and carbonated water, flavored with lemon.
4. ↑ Il est dans Bastille: French for "He is in Bastille." Bastille is a reference to a fortress in Paris that was used by French kings as a state prison.
5. ↑ Wisconsin: probably a reference to Ed Gein.
Milwaukee: probably a reference to Jeffrey Dahmer.
6. ↑ Budding: mo(萌) as in moe(萌え).
7. ↑ Settlers of Catan: a multiplayer board game first published in Germany. Players assume the roles of settlers, each attempting to build and develop holdings while trading and acquiring resources.

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Credits

Story : Minase Hatzuki
Illustrator : Sasorigatame
Translator : zzhk

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